

TOO CONTRARY TO MARRY
By Susan Gee Heino

*Mistress Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells,
And pretty maids all in a row.*

Whitstable, Kent, England May 1817

Gathering clouds rumbled in the gray sky above. The widowed mistress of the house, Mary Sinclair, had been monitoring the weather, hesitant to abandon her usual hour for gardening. She glanced around and assessed the measure of moisture in the air. Not salty from droplets blown in over the sea, but fresh with a bit of a chill. The clouds were moving in quickly from the west and they would bring a rain; a good one. Her precious rose bushes would have to wait for the attention she eagerly lavished on them.

“Girls,” she called to her daughters. “Let’s gather our things and head indoors. I believe it’s going to storm.”

All five of them seemed to sigh in unison. In many ways the Sinclair girls were perfectly unique, but there was one common passion they shared. Mary’s daughters enjoyed their time in the garden every bit as much as she did.

“But I love being out in a storm, Mamma,” ten-year-old Bess, the youngest, protested. “Can’t we sit here and enjoy it?”

“And have our bonnets ruined and our clothes spattered with mud?” the middle girl, Clara, said with a disgusted sniff.

Anna, the eldest at 20, sighed from her easel. “Pity, the light is so perfect just now and I’ve very nearly finished my painting.

“Alice and I don’t care about paintings or clothes,” Bess complained. “We like to play in the rain, don’t we Alice?”

Alice—just two years older than Bess—nodded, then looked to her older sisters and appeared less sure of what she wanted to do. At 12, she was caught firmly between being a child and becoming a young lady. Mary sighed. Time marched on relentlessly and her girls were growing up.

“You’ll both catch your death of cold,” 18-year-old Emma said primly, shutting her book and standing to impatiently wait for the others. “Obey Mamma and come inside.”

Mary’s efforts to hurry the girls were interrupted by the appearance of guests. Two gentlemen entered hurriedly through the vine covered gate. They bustled in, their coats billowing in the gathering wind and their hats all askew.

“Forgive such an unceremonious arrival!” the taller of the two said, holding his hat and regathering his composure. “We were afraid the time it would take to go to the front of the house might get us soaked! You do see that there’s a storm coming, don’t you?”

“Of course we do, Mr. Wilkinson,” Mary replied curtly, although she could hardly keep from smiling at her disheveled friend. “Come inside with us. Girls, hurry with your things now! Anna, have a care with those paints. It seems you are forgetting some.”

Anna’s face had gone flushed and she quickly busied herself with the pallet and paint pots she had momentarily forgotten. Little Bess grumbled about the lack of adventure in her life, but everyone else hurried toward the door. The gentlemen stood back as Mary ushered her ruffled troupe inside. It was not a moment too soon, either. By the time they were all safely under roof, huge wet drops were spattering the windows.

“Looks like we barely missed it,” Mr. Wilkinson commented.

His companion nodded in agreement, though Mary had no idea who the younger man was. She was too busy gathering bonnets and aprons and gardening tools, however, to make introductions just now. At last things were settled and she could lead them all into the drawing room at the front of the house.

“Welcome, Mr. Wilkinson,” Mary said with unnecessary formality. “To what do we owe your visit today? All is well at the harbor, I presume?”

“Indeed, Ma’am,” Mr. Wilkinson replied. “Quite well, actually. That is why I have brought around young Mr. Tomlin. He’s been hired to assist with the business.”

“Oh, how wonderful,” Mary said, finally getting the chance to observe this newcomer. “Are you from here in Whitstable, Mr. Tomlin?”

“No, Ma’am,” the young man replied, nervous with all eyes on him. “I’m originally from London, but just out of school and my uncle works as a solicitor here in Whitstable. He recommended me to Mr. Wilkinson.”

“And I am very lucky that he did!” Mr. Wilkinson praised. “I expect you to become indispensable in the area of overseeing the Sinclair interests.”

His announcement left Mary perplexed. “Mr. Wilkinson, will you no longer be managing my husband’s accounts?”

“*Your* accounts,” Mr. Wilkinson corrected. “Your husband—God rest him—left his half of our ventures in your very capable hands, Mrs. Sinclair. Over the years I have merely acted at your direction regarding them. It is a tribute to your good judgement and excellent sense of business that I can no longer manage it all on my own and have need of Mr. Tomlin’s assistance.”

“And you will continue to be involved?” she asked, hoping she did not sound as nervous at the suggestion as she felt.

“Indeed I will,” he assured her. “I will continue to oversee and consult much as I have been doing, so do not rejoice that you are rid of me yet.”

She was relieved and laughed at his teasing. “I should never want to be rid of you, Mr. Wilkinson.”

“I am very glad to hear it, Mrs. Sinclair,” he said with his usual lightness, yet Mary noticed a slight change in the tone of his voice.

She met his eyes and found something new, something she had not seen in his expression before. Was that a slight crease in his brow? The man had a perplexing look about him, as if he were in possession of some significant information, yet not sure what to do with it. It was not a look she was used to seeing on him.

For all the years she had known Mr. Wilkinson, he had been sure and decisive. What could have caused such a change in demeanor? Mr. Wilkinson had first joined Mr. Sinclair in business when he himself was no older than Mr. Tomlin was now. Since then, he had proven an honest, forthright friend to their family. Why was Mary suddenly at a loss to know his intent?

Indeed, something was bothering him; Mary was sure of it. What could it be? Unless... well, if there was anything unusual about Mr. Wilkinson, then she must credit the only unusual thing to have occurred of late. The only unusual thing she knew of, however, was the hiring of Mr. Tomlin.

Of course Mr. Wilkinson would explain nothing to her in front of the young man and her daughters, so for now she would play hostess and wait. She could trust her old friend. If there truly was something to worry about concerning her late husband’s business interests, Mr. Wilkinson would confide. At some point.

It did make her decidedly worried in the meantime, though.

“We are very happy to have you join us, Mr. Tomlin,” she said, possibly just a bit too brightly. “Welcome to Whitstable. These are my daughters: Miss Anna, Emma, Clara, Alice and Little Bess.”

“I’m not little!” Bess declared. “I’m ten years old... or will be, next month.”

“Ten years old, nearly?” Mr. Tomlin said with a nervous—but endearing—smile. “Indeed, that is nearly grown.”

“I’m half of what Anna is, and I hear people saying that she’s practically old,” Bess said, her chin raised smugly up toward the ceiling.

Mary was sure no one could miss the sound of Anna’s mortified gasp.

“That’s enough, Bess,” Mary said before the girl could cause her sister any further embarrassment. “Perhaps you should go upstairs and wash now. Nanny Lane will have tea for you and then it will be time for lessons.”

“But I don’t want lessons today!” Bess complained.

“You need lessons,” Clara chided. “I saw some of your writing and wondered who let a wild monkey play with the ink pot.”

The other girls giggled and Bess fumed. Mary quickly interrupted before things

could get more out of hand.

“Clara and Alice will go with you and take their lessons now, too. Run along now, all three of you.”

Clara gave a frustrated huff. “But Mamma! I’m not a child like Alice and Bess. I’m sixteen years old!”

“And still in the schoolroom,” Mary said firmly. “No arguments. Go with your sisters.”

She gave her defiant middle daughter a look that indicated discussion was over. Clara pursed her lips tightly but had the good sense not to disobey. She gave the gentlemen a dramatic half-curtsey and forced a pretty good-bye as she took her leave, pushing her younger sisters ahead of her.

Mr. Tomlin seemed unsure what was expected of him in this situation, but he wished the younger girls good day as they left. Mr. Wilkinson patted Bess on the head as she passed. She rewarded him with a bright smile. Mary had to smile, too.

The child was a handful, indeed, but Mr. Wilkinson never seemed put out by her precocious behavior. The little girl had been nearly an infant when her father passed away; Mary doubted that she could even remember him beyond the stories she had heard. It was a blessing that Mr. Wilkinson had always been there for them, teasing the girls and doting on them ferociously. He had been almost as one of the family.

His own wife had died years ago, leaving Mr. Wilkinson with one son to raise on his own. He’d done well by the boy, who had been like a brother to Mary’s girls. They missed him terribly now that he had been off to school studying law.

And now, apparently, they would have to get used to missing his father, too. How odd it was going to be, working closely with Mr. Tomlin rather than Mr. Wilkinson. How many of the things Mary had always relied on Mr. Wilkinson for would now be handled by his new assistant? The more she thought of it, the more unhappy she felt about this change.

So she scolded herself. It was unfair to require so much of her friend. If Mr. Wilkinson wanted to devote his time to other matters, he ought to be free to do so. She could hardly make claims on his time, of course. If he needed Mr. Tomlin to take over certain duties, Mary would just have to get used to working with him.

Her daughters seemed to be perfectly content with this arrangement.

“I hope you are finding Whitstable to your liking, Mr. Tomlin,” Anna was saying. “It must be quite different from London.”

Emma did not wait for his response before she chimed in rapidly. “It is as glorious as everyone says? Elegant carriages on every street, shops full of goods from as far away as China? Buildings several stories tall, with rooftops all the way up to the sky?”

Mr. Tomlin was kind enough not to laugh. “I’m afraid it isn’t all as magnificent

as that, but it is quite a wonder. Have you never been?"

"No, we've never been outside of Whitstable," Emma said sadly.

"But Mamma has promised we'll have a season in London soon, haven't you, Mamma?" Anna said, catching Mary off guard. "It is what Papa always wanted for us, after all."

When Mary found her tongue, she was forced to agree with her eldest. "Er, yes... he did mention that, I suppose."

"Indeed he did!" Mr. Wilkinson confirmed. "He was so proud of his daughters. I recall him speaking on several occasions about how he looked forward to one day showing them the city and introducing them to society."

Mary felt her chest go tight with anxiety and she quickly reminded them all of reality. "But of course, he is not here and will never get that opportunity."

"Sadly, but London is not going anywhere," Mr. Wilkinson said with a shrug. "There's no reason the girls shouldn't carry on with his goal. They should certainly expect to visit at some point."

"Oh, you will find it quite amazing," Mr. Tomlin said, grasping onto the topic and smiling at Anna. "You will see the Thames crowded with barges and ships, fine horses along the promenade, and you must attend the entertainments at Vauxhall Gardens. I have seen balloon ascents, tightrope walkers, and even entire battle scenes acted out with cannons!"

"It sounds delightful!" Emma said, her eyes bright and hopeful. "Oh, Mamma, when can we go? You simply must take us to London!"

Mary's heart pounded, and she was nearly too flustered to speak. "Heavens! There is so much to do here... and we know hardly a soul in Town, Emma. I don't see how we could possibly—"

"But you do have friends in London," Mr. Wilkinson said, despite the warning glare that she shot at him. "You know young Tomlin's uncle, Mr. Bayes, don't you? He and his wife will be in Town this coming week. Coincidentally, Mr. Tomlin and I have business there during that time as well. I expect it will keep us there for a fortnight, at least. My son has a break from school, so he'll be joining us there, too. This would be the perfect time for you and your daughters to make a visit there."

"Oh, Mamma, could we?" Emma begged. Anna nodded brightly.

"It would be brilliant!" Mr. Tomlin said, nearly as enthusiastic at the notion as the two young ladies appeared to be. "My Aunt and Uncle would show you the sites, and my parents would be overjoyed to meet you, Mrs. Sinclair, as my new employer. You would be quite welcome in their home."

"It does sound truly wonderful!" Anna said with a wistful sigh, batting her huge blue eyes at her mother.

Emma's tone was nothing short of pleading. "Please, Mamma, let us go to

London for a fortnight!”

“In fact,” Mr. Tomlin added. “If you can make the trip, my parents are hosting a ball for my sister who is just coming out. She is rather shy, poor thing, and I’m sure she would relish adding you to her circle of friends.”

“Of course she would!” Mr. Wilkinson said. “The Misses Sinclair would make a wonderful addition to the guest list.”

Mary tried in vain to dissuade them all, but the idea was already firmly planted in their minds and they rattled on. Mr. Tomlin spouted off about all the various delights of the city, her daughters drank his words in with rapt expressions and huge, dewy cow’s eyes, and Mr. Sinclair urged them on with repeated assurances that the whole endeavor would be easily accomplished. Mary could scarcely get a word in edgewise, and she certainly couldn’t capture Mr. Sinclair’s gaze to convey her thoughts on the matter. He blustered on with as much glee as—or perhaps more than—the foolish young people.

How on earth did they believe this was possible? She could not uproot her household at a moment’s notice and go trundling off to London. It was a mutton-headed idea! As soon as they all stopped rejoicing over it long enough to draw breath, she would bring them back to reality.

If they ever stopped to draw breath. It did not appear that they ever would. And things became even more difficult when several squeals were heard from the doorway. Mary glanced over to find her youngest three daughters hovering there.

“Is it true, Mamma?” Clara said with starry eyes. “We are going to London?”

Bess grabbed Alice by the hands and began dancing her around. “London! London! We shall go to London!”

Mary was aghast. The whole room was in an uproar over this foolishness and there seemed to be nothing she could do about it. The girls giggled and chattered, the walls nearly reverberated with their excited noise. Mary put her hand to her chest and tried to catch her own breath.

Her eyes sought out and finally captured Mr. Wilkinson’s gaze. His eyes were bright with excitement, but his smile for her was calming and warm. He leaned toward her and his soft voice carried even over the girlish chaos.

“See how happy it makes them, Mary? London is not so very terrible. Your girls will enjoy a visit, and I will be there with you. Please don’t be contrary; say you will go.”

Her heart still pounded wildly and the thought of London made her dizzy. How could she take her girls there, toss them into the sea of humanity and not be terrified they might drown? But Mr. Wilkinson was right—they were terribly excited about it. They knew nothing of the dangers and pitfalls, the pressure and betrayal that lurked there, just waiting to prey on young ladies. How could Mary possibly keep them safe?

Their fresh young faces beamed with innocence and excitement. Of course they longed to see the city, to have a taste of the many wonders it held. It had been promised them since childhood, after all. Her girls were growing up—at Anna’s age Mary had been already married with two infants. Would she deny her daughters the chance to make futures of their own?

Of course not. She could not turn back the clock. They deserved to see London, to venture into the world and learn what life had in store for them. She would simply have to do better for them than her parents had done for her.

“Very well, Mr. Wilkinson,” she said finally. “We shall go to London.”

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Matthew Wilkinson checked the wall clock. Two minutes later than it had been last time he had checked it. How much longer before he could leave the office and go to the house he had leased for Mary and her daughters? This meeting he was in seemed to drag on forever.

As he had told Mary several days ago when they first arranged the plan to visit London, business had been good. The late Mr. Sinclair had been wise in his dealings and when he passed from this life, his wife and daughters were well cared for. He also had been wise to leave things in Mary’s hands, rather than appointing a trustee. She had an instinct for making smart, careful decisions.

Because of this, their small shipping firm in Whitstable was expanding. After his meeting today, Matthew was quite convinced that investing in a London expansion was a safe venture. He had not mentioned this to Mary yet, though. He wanted to be certain of the details first. Despite the fact that Mary had grown up in a prominent London family, she seemed to have an irrational distaste for the city.

As today was their day she and her girls were supposed to have arrived, he half expected to leave his meeting and find himself disappointed. The last word he had from her confirmed the plan for her family to take the house he had procured for them, but he could not truly believe it until he saw them there. Mary’s daughters were not the only ones thrilled at the prospect of the family coming to Town. Matthew was as jumpy and unsettled as a schoolboy. He had plans that went far beyond the paltry thousands of dollars currently being negotiated in this meeting.

“Well, Mr. Wilkinson, it appears the agreement is in order,” the older gentleman across the table from him said with a satisfied smile. “Your little operation is perfectly set to become quite a profitable enterprise.”

“It’s always been quite profitable, Mr. Cable,” Matthew said with his own satisfied smile. “At least for me and my partners. We are simply ready to allow others to share in that with us.”

The older man chuckled. “And I am glad for the opportunity. My firm has been

looking for the very sort of venture that you—”

Mr. Cable was interrupted as Mr. Tomlin knocked and then let himself into the room. Matthew tried not to let his nerves show as he drew breath and invited his young assistant into the room.

“Yes, Mr. Tomlin? Have we word from our other party?”

The young man nodded. “We do. They have arrived as scheduled and are settling into the lodging you have secured. We are expected to dine there tonight.”

“Wonderful! I’m very happy to hear it. Thank you, Mr. Tomlin.”

So Mary and her girls had arrived. He almost couldn’t believe it, but the energetic glow on young Tomlin’s face was proof enough. Since the two of them had arrived in London days ago the lad could scarcely stop speaking of Miss Anna Sinclair and how happy he would be to show her around Town. And her mother and sisters, of course.

Not that Matthew could blame him. Miss Anna was quite a lovely young woman with a clever mind and a pleasant demeanor. It was only natural that a young man so close to her age might develop a *tendre*. Did she reciprocate? Matthew could not guess, but they were in for a most entertaining dinner tonight, that much was certain.

“We are settled, then,” Mr. Cable said grandly. “Shall we have our men draw up the final papers?”

“That will be excellent,” Matthew agreed. “Now that my partner has arrived in Town, we will go over the final draft and will make ready to sign the documents.”

“Very well.” Mr. Cable shoved the stack of papers he had been reviewing toward his overly prim solicitor and pushed back from the table. “I will look forward to hearing from you. I hope we have everything finalized within the fortnight.”

Matthew nodded. “Indeed, that is exactly what I am hoping, too.”

He didn’t admit to Mr. Cable, though, that his own hopes involved much more than signing a few papers and exchanging a bit of money. Matthew’s concerns now were much more dire—a matter of life and death. Indeed, the up-coming fortnight would reveal the very fate of his own heart.

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Mary looked around her in a mild state of amazement. The house Mr. Wilkinson had let for them was far grander than she could have expected. It was on a most fashionable street, too, with Hanover Square just outside her window and Hyde Park a brisk, easy walk down Brook Street. In her youth, she recalled her parents envying those who lived on such streets. What would they think of her today?

Still disappointed, no doubt. She had married far below their expectations and then had the audacity to leave London altogether. As her husband made his own living, her parents could not be bothered to maintain close ties with their disappointing daughter. Mary's children scarcely knew their grandparents and when, sadly, they passed away, very little loss was felt.

Their ghosts still lingered in this city, though. Even as a fire burned cheerfully in the cozy bedroom Mary had appointed as her own, she felt a chill down her spine. *London*. She was back again and had brought her girls. The anticipation of what was to come nearly stopped the breath in her lungs.

How had she let Mr. Wilkinson talk her into this? Moreover, how had he paid for such luxury as this house? She had made him promise he would pay for this excursion out of her funds alone, but surely he had not kept his word. Certainly the house and the clothing she had ordered for her girls would cost far more than the budget she allowed herself. She would have to speak to him on this matter as soon as possible. Indeed, he was expected for dinner, but could there be a chance his business for the day might end sooner than expected? She checked the clock and wondered if she might have opportunity to see him earlier than dinner time tonight.

Merely to discuss the matter of his over-expenditures, of course.

The maid's tentative knock at her door caused her to jump. Mr. Wilkinson had even seen to hiring the extra staff they would need in this house, which no doubt added to the cost. Mary's own maid, Rhoda, had come along, but Mr. Wilkinson insisted additional help would be needed and set them up ahead of time. Seeing the size of this house, Mary realized he'd been right.

"Sorry to startle you, Mistress," the maid said. "But there is a gentleman here to see you."

"Mr. Wilkinson?" she asked, far too quickly.

The maid seemed surprised. "Yes, that is his name, though he said you likely weren't expecting him."

"Er, no, he's come a bit early."

"Shall I ask him to return later, Mistress?"

"No! That is... I can arrange my schedule. Ask him to wait in the drawing room, please."

"Of course. Shall I have cook put water on for tea?"

"That would be lovely, thank you. Mr. Wilkinson is an old friend of the family."

"I'll see that he is made comfortable," the maid said with a competent nod.

"Thank you, Nancy. It is Nancy, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mistress. Thank you." The maid curtsied and turned to leave.

Mary called her back. "Nancy... er, do I look presentable?"

Nancy smiled. "Pretty as a picture, Mistress. I'm sure your old family friend

will be quite pleased to see you.”

Instantly Mary felt her face go warm. She was mortified to think that Nancy might have misconstrued her words, but she was at a complete loss to correct her. The more she was flushed and flustered, the more it seemed her interest in Mr. Wilkinson’s arrival had some deeper meaning. She had not meant to convey that idea at all! The maid clearly recognized her chagrin but merely chuckled kindly at it.

“I’ll go invite him to wait, Mistress. But if you ask me, this *old family friend* of yours could hardly be considered *old*.”

Still smiling to herself and laughing quietly, the maid scurried away. Mary was alone, blinking at her reflection in the mirror and wishing her eyes did not show so many lines at the corners and wondering if there was anything left of the blushing young girl who had last been in this city more than 20 years ago. Was she still there, full of dreams and secret longing? Or had she been fully replaced by the plain, practical woman Mary had long since become?

Gazing at her own image, Mary knew what she saw. *Just what*, she wondered, *did Mr. Wilkinson?*

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“Good afternoon!” Matthew greeted as Mary entered the room. The already sunlit area brightened at her appearance. “I see travel agrees with you. Have you found the accommodations acceptable here?”

“The house is exceptional!” she said, brushing by him and smelling delightfully of rose water and lemon. “I’m afraid to even ask how much it will cost me!”

“Then don’t ask. Tell me about your journey. Did you and the girls have an easy drive? I’m sorry that Mr. Tomlin and I were called away before we could travel with you.”

“You and Mr. Tomlin had business to attend and certainly that should come first. The girls and I traveled very well, thank you. They are quite taken with this house and we’ve only had one moment of hysteria since our arrival.”

“What on earth happened?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Bayes heard we arrived and came to welcome us—they arrived here from Whitstable just yesterday. They offered to take the girls into Hyde Park and made the mistake of telling Bess she would see the Serpentine there. She assumed that meant there would be a serpent.”

“And the poor child was terrified?”

“No! You know my Bess; the poor child was furious that she hadn’t brought along a sturdy net to capture the thing! She had a fit, demanding we go to the shops to find proper equipment.”

He laughed, picturing the conversation perfectly. “No doubt Bess was quite let down when she learned the Serpentine is just a decorative lake, and a rather shallow one, at that.”

“You can imagine that she was. Very nearly refused to go! But when Mrs. Bayes promised there would also be a visit to a treat shop, she was suddenly most agreeable.”

“Bess isn’t one to be left out of a treat,” he chuckled. “But what of you? No treat for you today?”

“No, there are too many things for me to tend here. I still have some trunks to unload, cook needs me to make up the menu, and our first parcels from the dressmaker should be arriving today. There will be other opportunities for me to venture out.”

“But will you take them?”

“What?”

“Will you take the opportunities as they come? Will you venture out, or will you find more trunks to unload?”

“I am not a hermit, Mr. Wilkinson. You know I have no love for the city, but for my girls I will go out and about in it.”

“Only for them?”

“What other reason could I have?”

“Well, I had rather hoped you might have some enjoyment for yourself.”

“I enjoy tending my garden at home, in Whitstable,” she said sharply. “If I wanted to enjoy myself, I would have stayed there.”

“Always so contrary. Very well, then, what about me? Are you opposed to me finding enjoyment while we are here?”

As expected, his words confused her. She screwed her expression and tipped up her chin.

“Of course not, Mr. Wilkinson. You are welcome to do as you like.”

“Excellent. What I would like this afternoon is for you to accompany me on a drive.”

“Er, what?”

“Yes, that would most definitely be enjoyable. I have a well-sprung carriage waiting outside and the weather is perfect. Come with me, Mrs. Sinclair; grab your shawl, pop on a bonnet, and let us go see what London looks like today.”

She appeared terrified at his suggestion. “But I couldn’t possibly! No, there’s too much to do here... the girls will be home soon and they’ll need me... I still haven’t given the menu to cook!”

“Please, Mary. Come for a drive.”

Her expression remained so horrified that he nearly regretted his request. Was the thought of an afternoon spent with him so very unpleasant to her? He knew she

thought of him as nothing more than an associate, a necessary partner in business ventures, but he had at least hoped a part of her viewed him as friend. Had the many years between them truly invoked no hint of warmth in her? He'd allowed himself to feel encouraged by her willingness to bring the girls into Town, but apparently that was utterly premature. Given her hesitation and dismay now, he was ready to admit defeat.

But then she gave him one glimmer of hope.

“Can you promise that we will not venture too far and that we'll be back here within an hour?”

He fought to keep a schoolboy grin from taking over his face.

“Yes! If that is what you wish, then I will certainly promise it.”

And by God, he would watch the time to the minute. That hour would go by far too quickly, he knew, but if the very contrary Mistress Mary Sinclair was beside him, he would enjoy every second of it.

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Mary glanced at the clock. Nearly half-past eight; Mr. Wilkinson should be here any minute to carry them to the Tomlin's ball. She knew he would not be late. Every day this week she had gone driving with him and every day—without fail—he had arrived on time and brought her home precisely when he said that he would. The hours spent with him had been nothing short of delightful. Despite their city surroundings, she felt quite comfortable with Mr. Wilkinson. He was sociable, sensible, and safe.

She could hardly deny that tonight would be different, though. Tonight she would not be with Mr. Wilkinson alone; they were heading to the Tomlin ball. This would not be a quiet afternoon riding through the park, but a noisy soiree crowded with strangers and filled with all sorts of possible dangers.

What if her girls found their first ball as terrifying as she had? True, she had done what she could to prepare them—seen to refreshing their dancing lessons, ordered suitable gowns, warned them to never be out of her sight—but was it enough? Anna was old enough to manage such an event, perhaps, but what of Emma and Clara? Oh, perhaps Mary was a fool to have agreed to let all three of her older daughters attend.

What if they compared themselves to the swarms of cultured young ladies in daring French gowns? They would feel rustic and hopelessly inadequate. Surely their quiet lives in Whitstable were too dull and drab for the London set. What if no gentlemen asked them to dance? Worse, what if the wrong sorts of gentlemen asked them to dance? What if Mary lost sight of them in the glittering crush and they fell prey to scoundrels and rogues? Oh, but such horrible worries flashed

through her mind!

Surely she was a fool to allow them all to attend such an event. Perhaps a sudden headache would be wise—a valid reason to keep them all home for the night.

“Mamma, how do I look?” Clara asked.

Mary took her focus off of her fears and gazed at her middle daughter. At 16, Clara was rather young to attend balls, but as this was a special occasion—and as the Tomlin’s made special effort to include her in their invitation—Mary had reluctantly given consent. She could not entirely regret it, either. The joyous glow on Clara’s innocent face was priceless.

“You are beautiful,” Mary said. “As pretty as any other young lady who will be there tonight.”

Clara beamed. “Thank you, Mamma. Thank you for my pretty gown, and for allowing me go to the ball.”

“Do I look pretty, Mamma?” Emma asked, flouncing into the room and twirling in her own stylish gown.

Anna followed behind, more mature, yet still seeking her mother’s approval.

“You look like a fashion plate,” Mary assured them. “If only your father could see you... he would be so proud.”

While the thought of her girls being so grown up and heading off for their first ball bought the sting of tears to Mary’s eyes, the girls obviously felt only excitement and glee. They had dreamed of this night for so long, it was only natural they should be so happy. Mary reminded herself to be happy for them.

“Oh! I hear someone at the door!” Anna said brightly. “Mr. Wilkinson must be here.”

The sound of his arrival downstairs sent a wave of panic through Mary. It produced giggles of eagerness in her girls, though, and brought the two youngest ones dancing down from their bedroom to gawk at their sisters and beg for promises of such finery for themselves one day. All hope of elegance and decorum was lost as the lot of them bustled down to the drawing room to meet Mr. Wilkinson and cajole him into gushing and praise.

In his usual nature, he was generous with his admiration and found something entirely unique and fitting to say to each girl. By the time Alice and Bess had been sent back up to bed and the rest of them were situated securely in Mr. Wilkinson’s fine carriage, even Mary had begun to feel a bit more positive about their upcoming evening. When Mr. Wilkinson gave her a warm, reassuring smile, her own heart fluttered with a sweet anticipation she had not felt in years.

How odd! She had no reason for such missish trembling. It must simply be anxiety for her daughters, of course. These butterflies were not her own; no one at this ball would even notice such a dowdy matron. Still, she met Mr. Wilkinson’s

gaze and went breathless and giddy, just the same.

* * *

Matthew was trying not to add to Mary's nerves by hovering over her, yet he could not seem to help himself. He knew this evening was difficult for her. For some reason, she'd been quite reluctant to let her girls attend Mr. and Mrs. Tomlin's ball, yet she had swallowed her fears and gave every appearance of enjoying herself.

Her eagle eyes scanned the dance floor with deadly intent, though. She knew every motion, every step that her daughters made. She was keeping a careful account of whom they danced with, too, he noted.

"I'm glad my son, Will, brought along his friend, Gerald, from school," Matthew said casually. "He seems quite a fine dancer."

"Yes," Mary agreed, but her tone was less than agreeable. "He should, perhaps, share his talents with some of the other young ladies here, though, and not stand up for every dance with my Clara."

"He does seem to be getting on quite well with her," Matthew admitted. "But as he is a year behind Will, no doubt he is happy to meet a young lady who is close to his age."

"She is too young for him, still," Mary declared. "I should not have allowed her to come."

"But look how she is enjoying herself," Matthew said, treading carefully around the topic. "You will be back in Whitstable soon; it isn't as if after this she will be dancing at balls every evening."

"True. I must keep reminding myself that. We will be home soon; home where it's safe."

Her words struck him as odd. "Do you not feel safe, Mrs. Sinclair? Has anything occurred during your stay in London that I'm unaware of?"

"No, of course not, Mr. Wilkinson. I'm sorry... I know that I fret too much. I'm simply not accustomed to seeing my girls so surrounded by young men."

"Indeed, they have caused rather a swarm, haven't they?" he chuckled. "London will be bereft when they leave it."

"London will easily find its next belles. Young ladies are quickly forgotten and quickly replaced around here. Ah, look, the song has ended and they are coming this way."

Indeed, the whole lot of young people were making their way through the crowd toward them. The three Sinclair ladies and their new friend, Miss Tomlin, were accompanied by Mr. Tomlin, Will Wilkinson, Will's friend Gerald, and another young man who seemed a particular beau of Miss Tomlin. They made four

very attractive couples, a situation Mrs. Sinclair seemed to notice immediately.

Her concern was evident on her face as she eyed the young men and their proximity to the young ladies. Her expression only grew more alarmed as Mr. Tomlin spoke.

“Quite a crush, isn’t it?” he said jovially. “I only hope we’ll all be recovered enough tomorrow to take the lovely drive we have planned.”

“Drive?” Mary said sharply.

“Oh yes!” Anna chimed. “Mamma, Mr. Tomlin has the most lovely carriage and we were hoping that if Will could have use of Mr. Wilkinson’s carriage, then all of us could go out to the countryside.”

Emma was as oblivious to the storm brewing on Mary’s face as the rest of the youths. She chirped her suggestions blithely. “We would take along a picnic, and if the weather is nice, Mr. Tomlin says we can go all the way to Hampton Court and see the maze!”

Now Mary’s face went ashen. “Hampton Court? But that’s miles and miles from here!”

“It is not a difficult drive,” Mr. Tomlin assured her. “But of course, if there is any sign of inclement weather, we would not travel so far.”

“Can we go, Mamma?” Clara asked, nearly bouncing with excitement.

Mary’s discomfort was palpable. Matthew quickly stepped in to cover her loss for words. He doubted the young people would like it if she found them; he knew Mary Sinclair well enough to recognize her expression. She had no intention of allowing her girls to go off on a jaunt with these young men, even if one of them was Will, whom she had known for all of his 18 years.

“Finish enjoying tonight’s festivities before you begin planning tomorrow’s,” Matthew chided them with over-done laughter. “Go back to your dancing. Mrs. Sinclair will certainly have to consider the young ladies’ schedules before she can commit them to a spur-of-the-moment picnic.”

“And don’t forget, Father,” Will added quickly. “The whole endeavor is a loss if you cannot spare your carriage for the day. There is little hope for all eight of us to pack into Tomlin’s rickety rig.”

Tomlin pretended to take offense at his younger friend’s ribbing, and lighthearted banter ensued. Tomlin defended his carriage while questioning Will’s ability to drive so much as a dog cart. Everyone laughed. The moment brought back many warm memories for Matthew of his own youth. How excited he’d been when he first commanded his own conveyance, feeling unstoppable in a world full of potential. These young people had so much to look forward to, so much life ahead of them.

Would Mary allow her daughters to go out and enjoy it? Would she ever allow herself some enjoyment? The pale of her cheeks and the frown on her face seemed

to indicate she'd remain contrary forever. What on earth could have happened to make her this way? Matthew had hoped that coaxing her to London, taking her out of her garden and away from her cloister would ease her fears and misgivings, offered her a chance to see life through fresh eyes.

It appeared he'd been wrong.

"Oh listen! The next set is starting up!" Emma exclaimed.

"To our places then!" Will cheered, offering his arm. "Will you dance with me, Miss Emma?"

"I would love to, Mr. Wilkinson," the young lady replied with flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

The giddy group jostled about, scurrying over to find places in line. The whole room filled with the hum of amiable chatter and it was clear that, come tomorrow, everyone would be buzzing about what a success Miss Tomlin's ball had been. Matthew knew the same could not be said for his own campaign. He'd done all he could to draw out his friend, but Mary still stood rigid, solid and cool as stone, completely unmoved by the company, candlelight, or music.

"I don't suppose you'd like to dance?" he asked in a last half-hearted effort.

"No," she replied quickly. "I... I believe I need some air."

Without further explanation, she turned quickly and practically ran from the ballroom. Matthew followed her, of course, though he had no idea what he could say when he caught her. Mary's distress was too obvious, too extreme for mere words. He had known she did not enjoy London, that she worried for her daughters, but he must have misjudged the intensity of her emotion. All this noise and excitement was too much, and it was his fault. He should never have pushed her to come here.

He followed her from the grand assembly room, along the adjoining gallery, then down the broad staircase toward the ground level. The entrance hall below was filled with guests arriving, guests leaving, and servants gathering hats and calling for coaches. Matthew could read the panic in Mary's movements and she paused just long enough to make the decision not to race out the main entrance, but to turn away from the many onlookers and duck through the nearest doorway.

There was no crowd here, no noisy laughter or music. Matthew trailed her along a dim corridor, one used to access smaller assembly rooms that were vacant tonight. At last he caught up with her and laid his hand on her arm. Her frantic footsteps slowed and at last she fell back against the wall, nearly overcome and hidden by shadow.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I just had to get away from there."

"I understand," he soothed, although his words weren't entirely true. He did not understand, not really. "What can I do? Shall I fetch you a drink? Call for the carriage and deliver you home?"

She seemed to consider both suggestions then shook her head. “No, I just need a moment. It’s so silly, but... all the dancing, the introductions, and talk of the girls traveling to Hampton Court! I’m afraid it all made my head spin.”

“Would you like to sit down?”

“No! Heavens, I shouldn’t have left them. I need to go back upstairs.”

“Your daughters are fine,” he assured her. “Mr. Tomlin is with them, his parents are there, Mr. and Mrs. Bayes... you can trust our friends, Mary. My own son Will is with them; your daughters are like family to him. He would never let anything happen, you know that.”

“I do... I do know that,” she said, but shook her head. “I don’t know what is wrong with me, Mr. Wilkinson, it’s just that—”

“Matthew.”

“What?”

“Can you not call me Matthew? Not after all these years?”

“But you... you are my husband’s friend.”

Even she seemed to realize the weakness of her explanation as she spoke it. Some of the wildness left her eyes and she blinked at him as he stood there, his hand still laid on her arm to steady her. He met her gaze with every ounce of warmth and comfort he possessed.

“I am *your* friend, too, Mary. I will always look after you as well as your daughters.”

She drew in a halting breath. “You are a good man, Mr. Wilkinson. My husband always trusted you, but...”

“But you cannot?”

It seemed ages before she shook her head sadly and replied. “No. I cannot trust anyone.”

“Who hurt you, Mary? Who made the world such a terrifying place for you that you must say *no* to everything and everyone?”

She lowered her eyes and would have turned away from him except that he was too close. There was nowhere for her to turn but toward him.

“I wasn’t always so contrary,” she said. “I was young once, I looked at life as my daughters do, with happiness and hope.”

“Then how did you lose that? Wasn’t your life with Mr. Sinclair a happy one?”

“Oh yes! He was very good to me! You know what a kind man he was, and I came to care for him a great deal, despite our difference in age.”

“He told me once that he had been friends with your family here in London, that you were married here. Why is the city so abhorrent to you now?”

She shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Tell me, then I will.”

“No, you’d only think less of me!”

“Less of you? Oh no, Mary, that could never happen. Share your struggle with me; let me help carry whatever burden this is that causes such pain.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot tell you. It is my own shame, and not yours.”

“Yet you will pass it on to your daughters?”

“What? No, never! They will never know any of it!”

“Ah, Missstress Mary... you truly are contrary. Don’t you see that by shackling them with your fear from your past, they are every bit prisoner to it? Can you not set them free?”

“But they are so young and so trusting! So many things could happen to them...”

“Yes, they might go on a picnic, they might enjoy the company of friends, and one day they might marry and raise a wonderful family of their own. All of those things could happen to them. Isn’t that what you want for your girls?”

“Yes, of course! It’s just that...”

“Yes?”

“Sometimes the things that happen are... bad.”

He nodded. “Very true. You and I both know that sometimes our happily-ever-after doesn’t last nearly as long as we want it to.”

Her voice was very thin and quiet. “Yes. I suppose you’ve had bad things in your life, too. It must have been terribly hard when you lost your wife.”

“I wanted to stop living when I lost her,” he replied, emotion gathering in his chest. “Perhaps if I’d not had Will I would have given up completely. Have you ever felt that way?”

“I have! I know just how that feels.”

“It was before Mr. Sinclair, wasn’t it?”

He knew from her look of surprise that he was correct. Perhaps he was out of line to comment on her past, but they’d come too far now to go back. She needed to face these ghosts and he intended to help her.

With a sigh of resignation, she confessed. “Yes. There was a young man... we were engaged. I thought he was the world; I thought that he loved me.”

“He broke your heart?”

“Into a thousand tiny pieces. I devoted myself to him completely—I did silly, reckless things out of love. He made me think I could trust him; he was from a prominent family, well-liked by everyone, and considered a great catch. My parents threw me at him right from the start, parading me around in clothes we could ill afford, shuffling me to every assembly he might attend, encouraging me to go driving with him, orchestrating picnics—”

“Ah, no wonder you are still a bit sensitive about that. So what happened?”

“He found out my father’s finances were not as they seemed. He claimed that I misled him, that I lured him for his fortune since I had none of my own! He jilted

me and married an heiress. I was devastated.”

“That lout! Your father should have taken him to task for such a thing!”

She gave a bitter laugh. “My father took *me* to task, scolding and berating *me* for letting him go. My parents were ashamed of me. I was ruined, they said. Everyone in Town had heard of my pitiful affair, seen me out and about with my beau, would assume every rumor was true. No decent man would ever want me.”

“That’s terrible! But... they were very wrong, Mary. Mr. Sinclair was a decent man and he loved you completely.”

“I know. He stepped up right away and offered for me. I thought he was merely being kind, but my father forced me to accept him. I hesitated, of course, but in the end there really was no choice. My fiancé did not want me, my own parents did not want me, but Mr. Sinclair did. It was a relief when he said we would be moving to Whitstable and my parents refused to come visit.”

“I’m so sorry for all the pain that must have caused you, and I see now why it was so difficult for you to come back here.”

“I feel rather silly about it, still so frightened and worried after all of this time.”

“That is not silly,” he said, touching her chin so that she would turn her face up toward his and not hide her eyes. “That is very brave. And you are wise to look out for your daughters. If you would like, I could concoct some reason for Mr. Tomlin to stay in Town and work with me tomorrow. I’ll deny Will use of my carriage, too. That should keep your girls here with you, safe and sound.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course I would, Mary. I’ll send Will back to school and bring in vicious guard dogs to frighten off every gentleman in London if it would make you more comfortable.”

She laughed and for the first time all evening he could hear actual mirth in her tone. “Oh, I don’t believe that is necessary. Although, it is very kind of you to offer.”

“Anything to help you enjoy the rest of your stay here in London. I know I’m the one who pushed you into this, and I am truly sorry. I should never have encouraged it—encouraged the girls to pester you—until I understood your feeling on the matter. I do hope you can forgive me.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she seemed to consider things. “I suppose I can forgive you, as long as you promise that you truly do not think less of me now that you know of my past, Matthew.”

“Of course I do not think less of—*Matthew!* Have I become Matthew at last?”

“Is that too forward?”

“Certainly not! But perhaps this is.”

He threw caution to the wind and leaned in for a kiss. He held her gently, so she would not feel trapped, but his lips covered hers and he soaked up the warmth from

her body as he pressed against her. His boldness was rewarded by her immediate response. She slid her arms around him and returned the kiss.

“Is it redundant to tell you how deeply I care for you, Mary?” he asked when it seemed they both ought to come up for air.

“I’m not sure what to say,” she replied. “You’ve been so dear to me for so long... I never dared to dream of anything more than your friendship.”

“Is friendship what you want, and nothing more? I would ask you to marry me right now, but not if it means losing you as my friend.”

“Must it be one or the other? I’m not sure I can make up my mind...”

She was teasing him and he knew it. He kissed her forehead.

“I should know better than to offer marriage to you,” he chuckled. “You are far too contrary to marry!”

“Very well then, I *will* marry you, Matthew Wilkinson, simply out of spite!”

He laughed. “And I will be the happiest man in the world, Mistress Mary, Quite Contrary.”

“But now, don’t you think we should return to the ballroom?” she said, suddenly going serious. “There’s no telling what our young people might be planning in our absence.”

“Indeed! But to be sure, Mary, if you want me to prevent their outing, I will gladly do that for you.”

“Hmm, I think I know what I would rather.”

“What?”

“Why don’t we allow them their outing tomorrow. In fact, we should go along with them! And the younger girls, too. You can give Will your carriage but secure another one for us. One that seats only two. Alice and Bess can ride with their older sisters—as chaperones.”

He could scarcely believe what he was hearing. “You want us to go along with them? On a picnic? Perhaps all the way to visit Hampton Court?”

“Why not?” she said with a mischievous smile. “And perhaps, if we are very lucky, we will get lost together in the maze.”

He knew they should leave this dark hallway, but he couldn’t resist wrapping her into his arms for one last stolen kiss. She didn’t seem to mind at all, despite the fact they could easily be discovered at any moment.

He whispered just before his lips took hers again. “Ah, Mistress Mary, no one could call you contrary now!”