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CAROLINE COURTNEY

A WAGER FOR LOVE

When he won a wager
by marrying her,
he never gambled
on losing his
heart.

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On the way to Lady Fitzallen's rout

the sound of a pistol shot outside brought the ladies to the edge of their seats. The carriage swerved and jerked to a halt, flinging Lady Elizabeth across Lavinia's lap. "Highwaymen," the lady moaned. "We've been held up and the postillion has nothing but an old blunderbuss."

The ladies exchanged nervous glances, their horrified eyes fixed on the door which was slowly opening. Lady Elizabeth, all atremble, fiddled with the clasp of her diamonds. "Quickly, child, take off your emeralds. Give them to the odious wretch," she said as a man looked up at them from the open door.

"Forgive me for discommoding you, ladies," he said, his voice muffled by the scarf he had round his mouth. His face was hidden by the hat he had pulled low over his face. He was dressed entirely in black and held a pistol menacingly in one hand. Lavinia's heart gave a frightened bound. She could not penetrate the disguise, but she recognized that lazily drawling voice. "It's not your jewels I desire, my lady," he said. "It is your cousin Lavinia I want, and indeed mean to have."

NOVELS BY CAROLINE COURTNEY

Duchess in Disguise
A Wager For Love

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CAROLINE
COURTNEY

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Although it was well gone two o'clock in the morning, the gaming room at White's was still crowded. The air was thick with the quiet hum of conversation, tobacco smoke and wine fumes. There was a sudden shout of laughter disrupting the silence hanging over the gaming tables, as Francis Dashwood leapt up onto his chair.

"S'death, March. I'll wager you five hundred guineas that the lad loses all he possesses."

"What, only five hundred!" replied March scornfully. "Done. What about you, Sandwich? How do you rate the puppy's chances?"

The Earl of Sandwich raised his glass and drained it before replying contemplatively, giving one brief comprehensive glance at the object of his companions' conversation, a young man sitting at the hazard table in the middle of the room. "Who is holding the bank? Ordley, isn't it? I fear the lad will lose March." He shook his head mournfully. "Tricky game at the best of times, but when the dice are against you . . ."

The young man of whom they were talking was a slim youth with fair hair, at that moment a trifle dishevelled. He was sitting at the hazard table with three other gentlemen and looking singularly out of place. From the agonized manner in which he was watching the dice, a white tense look about his face, it was obvious to even the

meanest intelligence that he was losing. However the habits of White's were too innured to such tragic occurrences to give the boy more than the odd bored glance. Opposite him sat the banker, the oldest member of the quartet and well into his forties. He was completely at ease, sprawling negligently in his chair, his once handsome face coarsened and bloated, speaking of a too liberal indulgence in the pleasures of life. He was as relaxed as the boy was tense.

The other two players were sitting back, relaxing, seemingly oblivious to the tension-filled scene being enacted before their weary eyes.

"Well, gentlemen?" asked the banker softly.

One of the trio turned to the banker. "Stap me, Ordley, you have the devil's own luck tonight. The Bank has never lost once. I'm finished, damn you." He turned to his companion, smothering a yawn.

"What of you, Bellfield? How have you fared?"

Viscount Bellfield shook his head, pushing his ribbon-festooned straw hat back off his forehead and scratching idly at his wig.

"Badly, Feltham, badly. It seems luck at gaming must run in your family, Ordley." He scribbled a note in a cramped hand, tossing it negligently across the table. "I'll settle with you in the morning, Ordley. Well, Feltham, another glass before we leave? I confess I'm for an early night, I'm done up."

"What!" jeered Feltham. "Rabbit it, Bellfield, done up at your age. Too many *filles de joie, mon ami*. They will be the death of you yet. That dancer you had in tow . . ."

Ignoring their bantering comments, Ordley continued to watch the youngest member of the group, fixing his eyes on him like a hawk with a particularly plump rabbit. "... And you, Arnedale. Have you had enough?"

There was just enough subtle contempt in the other's voice to bring a tinge of color into the boy's pallid cheeks.

He looked at the pile of guineas in front of the older man, his blue eyes glittering feverishly.

"Come. I'm a fair man. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a chance to win back all you have lost."

For a second hope flickered in the boy's eyes. He moistened his lips. He was already badly dipped and had in fact lost far more than he could afford. He took a deep breath... If he were to win... He nodded his head.

A slow smile spread over the waiting man's face. "So all I have here then—some thirty-five thousand guineas."

The boy swallowed nervously. Scarcely taking his eyes off him, Ordley commanded, "Call a main then, Arnedale—seven again is it to be?"

The boy shook his head. Surely his luck must change. "No," he croaked. "I'll take nine."

"Here." Ordley offered the dice box. The boy took it, shaking it carefully and tipping the dice out onto the table. There was a tense pause. For a second hope flickered and then died. Feltham looked on dolefully. "Too bad, Arnedale, *quatre-trois*. You should have stuck with seven. Never does to change numbers when the luck's against you." Ordley picked up the dice. His eyes never leaving the boy, Arnedale's, face. He shook and threw, with casual indifference. Feltham craned his neck over the table. "Seven and two. You lucky dog, Ordley. Too bad, Arnedale," he comisserated.

The boy got to his feet, his face the color of parchment. "If you will take my vowels, Ordley, I shall redeem them in the morning."

"But, of course, my dear boy. I am in no hurry," purred Ordley, genially. "Come, another glass of Canary before you leave—no?" He shrugged indolently. He could afford to be generous now.

With an heroic effort at an air of casual indifference the youth bowed once more to his companions, and

stumbled from the room. For a second there was silence, and then Dashwood's raucous voice broke the tension. "There, told you how it would be March—you owe me five hundred guineas."

* * *

Whilst the game had been in progress a group of men standing by the door had been conversing after a desultory fashion. One of them, a pleasant well set up individual with a mild open countenance, watched the young man come hurrying past them, his head well down.

"Well, Saltaire, I see your cousin has just stripped young Arnedale of all he possesses, poor fool."

The man thus addressed turned a bored aquiline profile in the direction of the speaker. Cool eyes of a particularly startling brilliance regarded him sardonically. Although not even the most demanding of critics could have found fault with the elegance of his apparel, there was nonetheless an air of careless disregard in the thick black hair tied back with velvet ribbon, completely free of any vestige of powder in a room full of grey, white, and even in some cases, lilac heads. There was a certain magnetic quality about the handsome, cynical face that automatically drew the eye. James Richard Gilles Lydbrook, 7th Earl of Saltaire, had the reputation of being a rake and a libertine, and there were even those who said, noticeably out of his hearing, that he revelled in such a reputation.

He gave the other a thin lipped smile, the green eyes faintly mocking. "Puppies without the ability to hold their own, my dear Ware, should not be playing here." He took a pinch of snuff inhaling delicately. "Tell me how did the boy get in here in the first place?" There was a faint sneer on his lips. "I would have thought it a trifle above his touch."

Lord Ware sighed. "I'm afraid I'm partly to blame. The boy came here with that ramshackle brother of

mine, Charles." He shrugged comprehensively. "The long vacation . . ."

For a few seconds Saltaire said nothing, merely holding his glass of wine up to the light and regarding it thoughtfully. "Tell me, Ware, what think you of this? A trifle sweet for my taste."

Lord Ware sighed. He had known the Earl of Saltaire for a good many years, and there was a certain glint in his eyes that he disliked. To be sure Gilles had not been drinking deep. Indeed, Lord Ware could never recollect having seen him the worst for drink, but even so . . . He looked round uneasily.

Viscount Ordley, well satisfied with his night's play, rose from his chair and started to gather up his winnings, gloating a little as he surveyed the vowels just given to him by the unfortunate Arnedale. Seventy thousand guineas. He laughed soundlessly. A fair night's play. He passed over them and started to count the rouleaus of guineas. Iron fingers clamped down on his wrist, arresting his hand in mid air. A soft drawling voice murmured in his ear.

"Well cousin, I see you have plucked your pigeon quite clean."

Before Ordley could stop him, Saltaire swept up the notes, holding them in long white fingers. "Seventy thousand, eh, cousin," he murmured gently, smiling disdainfully, as he opened his fingers and allowed them to fall back onto the table. "Tell me, can the boy afford it?"

Ordley looked up at his cousin, a fleeting expression of dislike tinged with fear, crossing his face. "Since when have you been so nice, Saltaire? The boy knew the stakes well enough."

The Earl continued in the same mild vein. "But that does not answer my question, does it cousin? I believe I asked you if the boy could afford it."

A deathly hush fell on the room; the attention of the occupants became riveted on the two cousins. For a moment Ordley was silent as he mentally cursed his cousin's

interference. Then he blustered, "What if he can't? He has estates."

"So . . . estates, umm." Saltaire's voice was thoughtful.

Lord Ware who had seen and correctly interpreted the expression on his friends face stepped forward anxiously. "I'm afraid I'm partly to blame, Saltaire. He should never have been allowed in. If he hadn't been with young Charles . . ."

"Ah yes, I had quite forgot for the moment that you knew the young idiot. What was his name again, Arneley?" He snapped his fingers, "No, I have it, Arnedale." The Earl appeared lost in contemplation of the lace ruffles at his wrists.

"Tell me cousin, how comes it about that the young man chose to play at your table. Or can I guess?"

Ordley's already florid countenance became an indignant puce. "Such concern, Gilles," he sneered. "One would almost think you were wishful of setting yourself up as a bear-leader, although to be sure, I understand our late lamented grandfather died most providentially. The Fleet can be damned uncomfortable, I understand—or is this a case of the Rake Reformed?"

For a second there was a gleam of anger in the long green eyes, quickly suppressed. "I believe I find you a trifle vulgar, Ordley. Now a family failing I vow."

The room held its breath at this calculated insult, but if they were expecting Ordley to take up the challenge, they were doomed to disappointment. He gripped his glass with tightly clenched fingers, his eyes dropping before his cousin's mockingly amused ones, but he said nothing.

Saltire smiled unpleasantly, "Just so, cousin, an unfortunate comment. After all now that I am become an Earl I have the family name to think of, and young men foolish enough to lose their money and blow their brains out inevitably cause scandals."

Francis Dashwood turned in his seat, leering know-

ingly at the Earl. "S'death Saltaire, that's rich. No liking for scandals, why it ain't above a twelve month since . . ."

Just in time he saw the flash of hauteur on the Earl's face.

"There now, Saltaire," he palliated, "Don't take me amiss. Lord, you're as touchy as a woman. No point in calling me out either" he added seeing the grimness in the other's eyes, "for I won't meet you. Dare swear if I did it would all be over inside two minutes."

There was a ripple of laughter from the onlookers. The Earl's swordsmanship was a byword. He had killed his first man before he was out of his teens.

Ordley, relieved to see his cousin's attention directed elsewhere, lifted his glass, malice showing in his bloodshot eyes, "Well, cousin, here's a toast to you. Tis only a pity our grandfather did not see fit to bestow upon you his fortune as well as his title." There was a stunned silence, which he affected not to notice, picking at his teeth. He ruminated thoughtfully for a second. "Lud, but he was in a rare old taking when he heard how you seduced old Malford's daughter. Spiriting the chit away from her home . . ."

"Seduced!" broke in the irrepressible Dashwood, "Why I swear the chit has had more lovers than . . ."

"Dashwood, I implore you," drawled the Earl. "Think of my reputation I beg, you have all but ruined it."

"What's that? Oh, yes, I see." Suitably crestfallen, Dashwood subsided whilst Ordley glowered darkly.

"But you did spirit her away cousin—you can't deny that."

For a long moment Saltaire held his cousin's eyes, his own expression enigmatic.

Lord Bellfield became intensely interested in the ribbons adorning his friend's hat. "That hat, Feltham, I don't know," he stroked his chin consideringly.

Feltham removed the offending article, eyeing it judiciously, "Tis all the rage, Bellfield. But mayhap you are

in the right of it, perhaps different colored ribbons, do you think," he asked reflectively.

As the silence between the two cousins stretched into minutes an anxious look crept into Ware's eyes.

March with a quick glance across the room asked sotto voce of Sandwich. "Well, what think you Sandwich? Is it to be a duel? If so I'll wager you fifty to one that Saltaire pinks him within the first two minutes. No, I'll give him one minute no more. Fine swordsman, Saltaire."

Sandwich shook his head, lips pursed. "That cock won't fight, March. Ordley's far too fond of his own neck to risk it with Saltaire, even with the prize of an Earldom. Come to think of it, I wouldn't care to cross swords with Saltaire myself. Resty devil is Gilles."

Saltaire leaned across the table, gently shaking off Ware's restraining hand. "Perhaps you would care to make yourself more explicit, cousin," he drawled languidly.

Viscount Ordley was no longer quite so relaxed. Indeed he looked distinctly ill at ease. "Fiend seize it, Saltaire, there's no need to get in such a temper." He searched nervously in one capacious pocket for his snuff box, to find the Earl was before him. With a deft flick, the Earl had his box open and was holding it out to him.

"Now you were saying, Ordley," he prodded gently.

Ordley shot him a baleful glare. "Come, cousin, it's all over town that our grandfather has left you his fortune only if you marry within three months of his death. How long have you left now?" he taunted. "Only a little over two months by my reckoning I collect."

"You are right as always, cousin, nine weeks to be exact. However you interest me. This, er, rumor, how comes it about that it is all over town. I own I had thought it a matter between my grandfather's man of business and myself. But there I repine too much."

There was an uncomfortable pause whilst the Earl studied the diamond studded buckle on one elegantly shod foot.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," muttered Ordley his color high.

"Oh indeed you were, cousin," affirmed the Earl, "especially if you hope to best me. Now, those vowels of young Arnedale's."

For a second Ordley looked a little puzzled. "Arnedale's vowels, but what have they to do with anything? We were talking of our grandfather's Will."

"You were talking of our grandfather's Will, Ordley. I believe I was endeavoring to steer the conversation into, shall we say, less dangerous waters?"

Ordley shrugged, "Have it your own way, cousin. What of Arnedale's notes?"

"I have it in mind to take them from you, cousin."

Beneath his cousin's sardonic eyes, Ordley blenched and a look of panic crossed his face.

With an amused smile the Earl rocked back on his heels, "Never fear, Ordley, I mean to play you for them, that is all. You may name your own stakes."

A rustle of anticipation ran through the room, as men gathered closer to the table. Here was sport worth watching.

"What's this, Saltaire?" queried Sandwich. "Do you have it in mind to play the hero and rescue the lad from his fate?"

Saltaire eyed him coldly. "Don't be a fool, Sandwich, you heard my cousin here. I might have the title, but my pockets are still to let." He picked up the dice shaking them expertly. "Besides it might be interesting to discover if my luck holds good now that I am become an Earl."

"Ready, cousin," he mocked.

Ordley checked him. "A moment, Saltaire. Not the dice. A wager, what say you? All I have here." He gestured to the littered table.

The Earl's hand hovered over the baize, his eyes sharpening. "Cousin?"

For a second Ordley's eyes shone with barely suppressed malice. "All these, including that young fool Arne-dale's notes, that you cannot marry within the week, but mind it has to be a girl of good family, unblemished, reputation and possessed of a fortune." He sat back in triumph, enjoying the sensation caused by his words.

The Earl uncurled his long frame and watched him thoughtfully. "Dear me, cousin, how very theatrical."

"You refuse?" asked Ordley eagerly.

The Earl studied his cousin's face mockingly. "Come, you know me better than that. A week you say," he mused. "It will suffice."

Open-mouthed, Ordley stared at him. "But Saltaire, you cannot . . . surely . . ."

"You expected me to refuse the challenge?" asked the Earl sardonically. His mouth curled contemptuously. "That was most unwise of you. You are a fool Ordley—stick to plucking pigeons."

Rigid with fury, Ordley stared at him. The room was awash with speculation. Saltaire might possess a fine old name, land aplenty, several fine houses and a title, but his reputation! A wealthy chit was a fortune from the Indies and a girl to marry off well, or perhaps some poverty-stricken Irish peer with his pockets to let and half a dozen daughters on his hands might—just might—consider an alliance with him, but the family of a girl of good breeding, unblemished reputation and a fortune—never.

Ware placed a restraining hand on his friend's arm. "Have a care, Gilles, I implore you," he murmured. "Surely even you won't attempt this folly? It's not too late," he pleaded.

He was wasting his time. The green eyes glittered dangerously. "You think I will not succeed?" He laughed gently. "Although he does not know it my cousin has done me a favor. A rich bride, tis just what I need."

"Where's the book?" shouted March. "Come on, hurry I say."

A sleepy footman was sent posthaste to collect it.

The Earl turned to Dashwood. "Well, Francis, and what is all this one hears about your, er, activities at Medmenham?"

There was a short tense pause, whilst several of the company affected not to hear, or become strangely absorbed in their footwear.

"What, can it be that you wish to join us at our frolics perhaps, Saltaire?" responded Dashwood softly.

There was just a suggestion of a fastidious shudder from the Earl. "Acquit me of that, Dashwood, I beg. I prefer to hunt my own quarry, not have it provided for me."

"A hunt which becomes increasingly difficult as your reputation spreads, eh, Saltaire?"

The green eyes narrowed a little. "My reputation, Dashwood," he drawled. "Surely it is no blacker than your own? Besides a little difficulty always adds, shall I call it, excitement, to the chase, don't you agree?"

Dashwood looked a little annoyed, "Come, Saltaire, since you returned from Paris minus the charming Isabella, the tongues have never stopped wagging, and by all accounts when you were over there . . ."

The Earl appeared to be lost in rapt contemplation of an extremely fine brocade coat, marvelously embroidered with humming birds, worn by a tottering exquisite. He raised his glass for a second. Dashwood's question hung on the air. At last, apparently satisfied, he allowed the glass to swing free on its ribbon. "That, my dear Dashwood, was six years ago. Since then I have lived a life of, if not irreproachable morality, well certainly . . ."

He was not allowed to finish.

"Moral, you," jeered Dashwood. "Lud, Saltaire, that's rich, and what about the lady's brother?"

"Yes, I agree. A trifle maladroit of me, I fear I had overestimated his skill with the sword. However, he is dead and no amount of repining will bring him back to life."

"Repine, you?" queried March.

One eyebrow lifted haughtily. "Did I say I repined,

March? I think not. I was of course referring to his family."

At that moment the footman came running up bearing a large leather bound book.

"Ah good," cried March. "Now let's get the wager written up."

It was done. Stakes called and bets laid. This accomplished to the satisfaction of all concerned, Saltaire placed one elegant hand on his friend's arm.

"I think it is time we took our leave."

"So where now, Gilles, the fair Julianna?"

The Earl shook his head. "I fear not James. I grow weary. Even the fairest charmer palls after a while do you not find? There is a tendency to become . . . well I fear I really must call it clinging. And one of the things I detest most is a clinging woman."

Ware frowned. Why must Saltaire always be so cynical. Women pursued him in droves, but it was Ware's private opinion that for all his much vaunted rakish ways, Saltaire cared not one jot for a single one of them. However, Ware's reflections were brought to an end by the eruption into the room of his younger brother, the Honorable Charles, patently a little high flown with wine.

"Ah, there you are, brother," Charles said genially. "Have you seen my friend, Arnedale?" He scanned the room a little blearily, his eyes coming to rest admiringly on the Earl. "Lud, Saltaire, emerald satin—tis very fine." He swept the Earl a fine bow, almost losing his balance and his wig in the process, and causing his unhappy brother to sigh a little. A painted and patched Macaroni in lilac satin and a lavender powdered ladder toupee tittered audibly behind his fan, faltering into an uneasy silence as he chanced to meet the Earl's eyes.

Ware watched his brother a trifle grimly. "Charles!" he remonstrated. "Really, could you not . . ."

Saltaire cut in smoothly. "I fear you have missed your young friend. He left somewhat hurriedly. Badly dipped I fear."