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ROSEMARY EDGHILL

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Rosemary Edghill

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A Fawcett Crest Book

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“You need only make clear to me the extent of my obligations to your . . . rank . . . and I shall fulfill them with dispatch.”

“Your obligations? I should be surprised, my lord, to hear that you knew what an obligation was,” his bride said tartly.

The headache receded a pace, and to his own surprise, Severn laughed. “If you have been listening to my sisters, Lady Severn, I am surprised that you are talking to me now.”

“But not surprised I married you,” Primula said flatly.

A Viscountcy is worth such small sacrifice, don't you think? The words ran through Severn's mind, but he found he could not say them. Though she had no reason to marry him except his title, he clung to the slender hope that Primula Greetwell had found some other reason to wed. . . .

Also by Rosemary Edghill
Published by Fawcett Books:

THE ILL-BRED BRIDE
TWO OF A KIND
TURKISH DELIGHT

Fleet Marriages

“In London, Fleet marriages . . . were notorious. They were performed without license, first in the chapel of the Fleet Prison and then in nearby taverns and houses, several of which bore signs depicting a male and female hand clasped together above the legend ‘Marriages performed within.’ The marriages were mostly conducted by clergymen who were imprisoned in the Fleet for debt and were allowed the ‘Liberties of the Fleet,’ that is to say, were permitted to move about freely within a certain area immediately surrounding the prison.” (*The English, a Social History*, Christopher Hibbert, p. 382)

“Fleet Prison, not far from Newgate, was one of three prisons chiefly for debtors administered by the Royal Courts of Justice at Westminster; the other two, the King’s Bench and the Marshalsea, were located to the south of the river.” (*Thieves’ Kitchen*, Donald A. Low, p. 56)

“Lord Hardwicke’s [Marriage] Act of 1753 directed that any person solemnizing matrimony in any other than a church or public chapel without banns or license should on conviction be adjudged

guilty of felony and be transported for fourteen years, and all such marriages should be void.

“These clandestine marriages (especially of minors) were performed in rooms and taverns near the Fleet, a notorious debtor’s prison on Farringdon Street. Defrocked . . . ministers, imprisoned for debt in the Fleet, earned the ready by performing surreptitious marriages. Until Lord Hardwicke’s Act went into effect as law in 1754, such marriages were perfectly legal.

“Members of the royal family, Quakers, and Jews were exempt under the Act, but Catholics were not. The only legal marriage a Roman Catholic could contract under English law had to be performed by an Anglican. . . . Scotland was declared exempt from the new law.” (*The Regency Companion*, Lauderdale and Hamlin, p. 80)

Prologue

MARCH 1807

"I AM AFRAID, Severn, that this time you've gone too far."

The light seeping through the library curtains was the dismal illumination of late afternoon, but Malhythe's servants had been forced to drag Lord Severn from his bed for this interview. Severn regarded his father with mingled amusement and shock.

"I am afraid, my lord father, that I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." With an indifference just shy of insolence, Severn seated himself. Crossing his legs, he concentrated his attention on the gleam of one silk-stockinged calf.

"Pity—as the matter has gone far beyond the realm of boyish prank. And you, my lord, are no longer a boy. I lunched last week with Lord Childwall—his son, you will recall, is one of your cronies."

Bewildered by the abrupt change of subject, Severn ran a careless hand through his disordered curls to conceal his unease. "Ah, yes, Lucius the Anatomist—a man with an eye for neck but no bottom."

"If you choose to mock me, Severn, you show yourself to be far stupider than I had given you

credit for. And I did, once, cherish some hopes of your intellect."

The arid acid in Malhythe's voice brought Severn to attention—whatever he was babbling on about, the old man thought it was serious, and the Earl of Malhythe was not a man noted for either scruples or nerves. Severn straightened slowly in his chair and set both feet on the floor. For a brief moment he wished his cuffs less ornate and his toilette less hurried.

"I meant no disrespect, sir. Pray continue."

Lord Malhythe leaned forward in his chair. The periwig that he affected despite changes in fashion gave him an antique severity, like a magistrate out of an old painting. His lace cuffs were brilliant in the gloom, and the large garnet on his forefinger flashed fire as he clasped his hands.

"As I told you, I lunched with Childwall. His son had come to him with a tale of an exploit so disturbing that he felt compelled to confess his part in it. Childwall found it difficult to credit that such a thing could actually take place in this century—but, hearing of your involvement, I did not."

Severn experienced a distinct sensation of unease. Mr. Lucius Foley—Lucius the Anatomist—had been Severn's agent in an enterprise of breathtaking scope—and now seemed to have published the affair to the world.

"I . . . see. And might one know what this third-hand report consisted of?" Severn still thought it unlikely that the Earl wished to tax him with his peccadillos—Malhythe had been a notable rake in his day.

"So the young fox has a few leagues left in him? Very well. Mr. Foley represented himself to his father as your agent in the seduction and spoilation of a young virgin of good family whom you cozened with false promises of matrimony, going so far as

to have a sham marriage ceremony read over the two of you—”

“Oh, no, Father—the marriage ceremony was quite real—it was only the priest who was a sham!” interjected Severn irrepressibly. Now that the matter was out he found it difficult to take seriously. His mind was already turning on the matter of a suitable repayment to Mr. Lucius Foley for his treason.

“Indeed,” said Malhythe frigidly. “And is that your sole offering with regard to this matter?”

Severn thrust himself to his feet and moved toward the sideboard. He splashed a careless peg of brandy into a glass, downed it, and took another. Much soothed, he turned back to his father. “Oh, very well. I shall take myself off to Rudbek for as long as you please. The chit won’t grass—you may satisfy yourself on that head—I called myself Cunningham and she hasn’t a clue to the identity of her loving husband. It is a famous joke, sir, I do assure you.” His volatile spirits lightening by the instant—when his father had called him to this interview he had thought it was a matter of his debts—Severn turned and arranged himself to indolent advantage by the fireplace.

Malhythe was by nature a cold man, with little in the way of warmth or fellowship to offer any of his children. Born into a mannered age, he valued the semblance of virtue even more than the assumption of it. He was far less concerned with the lost honor of the outraged virgin—whose name it had been little trouble to him to discover—than with the cavalier indifference to appearance and consequence that had caused his heir to go raking among members of his own class. One way or another, this behavior would cease. Malhythe opened a drawer and placed a slim calfskin wallet of papers on the desktop.

“ ‘A famous joke.’ Well, sir, perhaps you will find another as amusing. You are indeed, as you have foretold, to leave London—but not for Rudbek Manor.” Malhythe placed a large purse beside the wallet of papers. “Your man has been instructed to pack what you will require, and the coach is waiting to take you to Dover. I will be sincerely sorry if I should hear that your ship has been sunk. If you are boarded you may, of course, apply to my man of business for any reasonable ransom.”

“To Dover,” Severn echoed blankly.

“Your espoused standard of behavior has been in my mind for some time—boyish pranks from a man of five-and-twenty are as unsuitable to your station as they seem impossible for you to forgo. I have secured for you a position with the East India Company, which you may exploit to what advantage you will. I shall expect to hear that you have made your fortune. Or died,” the Earl added as an afterthought.

Severn stared at his father. “Banished to India? Over a trifle like this? It’s infamous—how can you consider such a thing?”

“I will thank you not to take that tone with me, my lord; I assure you, I could have made your penance far more onerous. As for infamy, I hardly think it is less infamous to trick a young girl not yet even out upon the town with promises that amount to little more than lies—or are you prepared to make good upon your word?”

“My word? What the devil do you mean?” Annoyed in good earnest now—for even his enemies could not accuse Lord Severn of timidity—Severn rounded heedlessly upon his father.

“You promised the girl—Miss Primula Greetwell, to be precise—the protection of your name.”

Severn stared at his father for a long moment of incomprehension. When he did understand he be-

gan to laugh, until he was forced to cling to the mantelpiece for support.

“Marriage! To Miss No One, daughter of Sir Nothing?” he said in derision. “Are you that desperate for me to wed? If that is your game you will catch cold at it—before I marry that whey-faced little ninny, I’ll—I’ll enlist, and there’s precious little you can do to stop me—or to make me go to India, for that matter!”

Father and son regarded each other long enough for Severn to regret his momentary levity. Lord Malhythe’s indifference to moralities and legalities alike was a legend that Severn’s set constantly hoped to outshine, and Severn wasn’t quite as comfortable in his defiance of the formidable old man as he hoped to sound.

“You leave regardless,” the Earl said passionately. “You have some say in the destination, that is all. Gretna—or Dover. Choose any other destination, my posturing young hotspur, and you will find yourself without a brass farthing with which to buy the allegiance of your pot-valiant cronies. Every door I can close to you I shall close, and when you are taken up for debt—as seems quite inevitable—you will have infinite leisure in which to reflect upon what an unlucky precinct the Fleet is to frequent.”

Severn stared, his green cat’s eyes wide with shock. The old man knew everything—the scrape, the name of the girl, even the shift by which he deceived her. He tried to summon up her face and could not—only the memory of a trick of youth and freshness that had marked her as his lawful prey. To marry her now would be to become the laughingstock of all he knew.

Any fate would be preferable. He was certain—or nearly so—that his father would intervene before he was hanged or transported for debt. He was

equally certain that the old devil would ensure that every unpleasantness inherent in the situation short of those final ones would be his to experience in full measure.

“Very well then,” Lord Severn said ungraciously. “I’ve always had a mind to travel. Dover it is, then. Now, if there’s nothing more . . . ?”

“Nothing at all,” his father agreed. “You’ve done quite enough already.”

Chapter 1

DECEMBER 1815

"OH, NO COLLEY, really! Marriage?" The speaker, known to all of her friends and most of her enemies as Aspasia, reclined in a welter of lace-trimmed pillows and stared at her companion incredulously.

"Marriage, my dear, is said to be the making of a man," Lord Malhythe said. "Perhaps it will be the making of my son as well."

Aspasia favored him with a sidewise stare and tapped her carmined lips with one exquisite finger. Her short dark curls bobbed with the gesture, and her sapphire eyes gleamed. "That depends, my lord, on what you want to make of him. Of course, by the time you know what you have it will be far too late to do anything about it." She sat up decisively and leaned forward. "And who can you possibly find to marry him?"

"That, my pet, will remain my secret for the moment. I'll tell you this much—she is of good family, will definitely accept my proposal—and is known to be to Severn's taste."

"So, they say, were half the ladies in London—and all the muslin company, though that was before my time." She paused in the conversation to select a *confit* from a plate by her bedside, admiring as she did so the sparkle of the sapphire bracelet

she wore. She bit into the sweetmeat, and the gems flashed brightly in the weak winter sunlight. Malhythe gave her gifts and liked to see her wearing them. "Oh, you needn't rip up at me—it's only common gossip."

"No gossip you repeat could ever be common, my dear Aspasia." Lord Malhythe patted the couch beside him invitingly, and after a moment she joined him, fluttering gracefully to rest in a welter of silk and swansdown. He liked to see her *en négligée*, too, and so she appeared. Everything in her charming jewel-box house in St. John's Woods was to Lord Malhythe's taste. After all, he paid for it.

"How kind you are today, my lord—or is it laziness? But tell me—who is the bride, and how will you get Severn home from India to wed her?"

Lord Malhythe's son Severn had been banished to India for almost as long as Malhythe had had Aspasia in keeping, and she could number the times the Earl had spoken of him on the gilded toenails of one pretty foot. It did not seem a relationship of such warmth and filial devotion as to allow the Viscount's wedding, sight unseen, a bride of his father's choosing.

"Now that is the simplest part of the entire matter," the Earl said, pulling her comfortably closer. "My gentle son and heir has been petitioning me these past few years by every passing ship—though I warrant Bonaparte hasn't made that too easy—to be returned to the so-loving bosom of his family, not to mention the felicities of the English climate. Now that peace has broken out I suppose his letters will come more often—and I am tired of reading them."

"So you allow him to return, and marry him off, and hope he will settle down," Aspasia said doubtfully. Malhythe was minded to be expansive, it seemed, but Aspasia's experience of human nature

did not make it seem likely that his plan would succeed.

“Child, I am giving him the best of all reasons to do so. If his marriage is not to my taste I will cut him off without a *sou*—and marry.”

Not one gilded fingernail twitched, though their possessor felt a cold pang of dread. Aspasia had learned economics in a hard school. She knew exactly how the Earldom was situated, and what the Earl’s marriage would mean to both Severn and herself.

The Earldom of Malhythe was a ramshackle creation of Charles II, and none of the peerage’s holders had ever seen reason to improve on the merry monarch’s works. Not a stick nor stone of Malhythe was entailed, all—houses, horses, lands—passed at the whim of the current Earl. In fact, it had passed to its present holder from an irritable great-uncle long before the title had. Only the Glorious ’92 and the continental bloodbath that followed had winnowed the lines of descent to the point that Colworth Rudwell was Earl of Malhythe as well as master of Rudbek Manor. He could will it all—house, lands, income—away as easily as it had come.

“Well, am I to wish you very happy? I shan’t, you know,” she said candidly. “I think I shall be insulted, instead.” Malhythe loved to tease her until she ripped up at him—let him find disappointment this time.

“You may be insulted if you like,” the Earl said blandly. “I imagine Severn will be appalled—his expected inheritance wasted on what I trust will be a large and happy family—”

“My felicitations, my lord,” Aspasia interjected.

“—and, if a son is born, the possibility that I will find some way of transferring the Earldom thither, instead of to his own unbowed head.”

“‘How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning.’ I ought to have been more suspicious when you brought me sapphires, but this—! To be turned out of my own house into the worst snows in ten years . . .”

“I would find the image more affecting did I not know that the Deed of Gift I gave you for the place reposes with your bankers. Sheathe your claws, pet—I have no intention of reentering the happy state of matrimony. Unless, of course, Severn does something to displease me.”

“I hope, in that case, that you have already chosen your own bride, as well as your son’s!”

Malhythe laughed, as she had meant him to, and conversation turned to the victory celebrations and the effect on England of free trade with France again after almost twenty years.

But long after he had left Aspasia turned the disturbing intelligence over in her thoughts. Severn was to marry as the price for being allowed to return home, and Malhythe was to pick the bride. Well and good: but if Severn’s behavior did not suit the Earl, Malhythe would marry to disoblige him.

And that was not well and good. Above all things Malhythe valued discretion; the name of Aspasia’s protector was a mystery to the *ton*; he did not speak of his mistress nor did she disclose the name of her lover. A man of such discretion would be wise enough to know that the happy marriage he spoke of so blythely could hardly be a reality while Aspasia reigned over a more familiar and comfortable household.

Nor would she beg to stay, only to see his wife replace his mistress in his affections, as had happened to some of her friends. No, if Malhythe chose to marry, Aspasia would leave him immediately—and at the moment she could see nothing to prevent it.