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Rachel Jones set the globe upon the lamp she had just trimmed and looked again at yesterday's *London Times* lying folded upon the end of the sofa. Dare she? *He's still away*, she reminded herself. And Mrs. Hammond would not wake for at least another hour. Still, she went to the parlor doorway and held her breath. Faintly through the open window behind her drifted the ringing of horse hooves against cobbled stones, the *sweet-sweet-sweet!* of a sparrow in the mimosa tree. But in the corridor, silence. Silence was good.

Still, she had to be careful. She carried the newspaper to the gateleg table where Mr. Moore and Mrs. Hammond took most meals, and positioned herself between table and empty fireplace so that she could watch the door.

The front page gave an account of riots going on in poor neighborhoods of New York, because a recently-passed military conscription act allowed a man to avoid service by paying a fee or hiring a substitute. With limited access to newspapers, nineteen-year-old Rachel possessed only scant knowledge of the progress of the war going on across the Atlantic. And so the prayer she sent up was vague, but she trusted God knew the details.

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May it end soon, Father, and may right prevail.

With trembling fingers she turned to the last pages.

Scullery maid required, 5 pounds per annum plus room and board, 17 Holland Street Kensington, letter of reference required.

The last statement may as well have read *personal introduction from Queen Victoria required* for all the encouragement it gave her. She ran a finger slowly down the column. The locations and positions varied, but every listing demanded a character reference. Until her finger stopped at one on Russell Square.

“Parlormaid needed, clean and industrious,” she murmured.

“Thinking of hiring one, Rachel?”

Rachel’s heart lurched in her chest. She jerked her hand away from the newspaper. Gerald Moore stood so close to the other side of the table that his shadow lay across the page. How had she not noticed? “I’m sorry, sir. I was just . . .”

“Looking for another position,” he finished. There was an almost feminine beauty in the thick lashes sprouting from his heavy-lidded eyes, but the irises were as pale blue and cold as chips of ice, and the aristocratic lines of his face were marred by lips much too thin. He shook his head, clucked his tongue at her. “And after all we’ve done for you. That really hurts, Rachel.”

Cheeks burning, she could not meet his stare but trained her eyes upon his chin.

“But do tell me,” he went on. “How will you manage that without a letter of character?”

“They don’t all require one,” she murmured, ignoring the warning in her mind.

“Indeed?” He sighed and nodded toward the newspaper. “Your naiveté is quite alarming. If you’ll turn over to the ‘situations wanted’ page, you’ll notice at least four times more postings, meaning four applicants for every position advertised. Whether or not references are mentioned, why would anyone hire a servant without them, with a labor market so bloated?”

It’s worth taking a chance, she thought but did not dare say. Pain shot through her jaw. She realized she was clenching her teeth and eased the pressure.

“And besides, Mrs. Hammond and I can read those same advertisements,” Mr. Moore went on, folding his arms. “You leave us, and I’ll track you down, inform your new employer that we discharged you because you’re a thief.”

He was bluffing. After all, he spent most of every evening playing cards, and did that not require some deception? Gathering up every ounce of whatever inner fortitude had not been browbeaten out of her in over six years, Rachel raised her chin, forced herself to meet his eyes. “And I’ll inform the police about you and Mrs. Hammond.”

“Indeed?” His chuckle shattered Rachel’s tenuous hold on courage. Leaning forward to rest his hands upon the open newspaper, he said gently, “You may just possibly convince the police to arrest us, but *holding* us is another matter. And while, yes, I’m obviously estranged from my family, my father would still use his vast resources and connections in a pinch. Did I ever tell you that a couple of the London magistrates were his Oxford cronies?”

He could read the uncertainty in her eyes, for the pale eyes narrowed, even as his voice softened. “And when the police

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let us go—which they’ll be forced to do—I’ll find you. And it won’t be pretty.”

This was no idle threat, Rachel knew. He was just vindictive enough. Tears stung her eyes and blurred the smug image before her. “Why me, Mr. Moore? You could hire someone else. I’ll keep your secrets.”

“Yes, you will,” he said agreeably, as if she had just commented on the weather. “And to answer your question, there are three reasons we’re obliged to keep you on. First and foremost, you know too much. Secondly, you’re a diligent worker.”

He was staring at her in such a familiar manner that Rachel was forced to look away.

“And thirdly, we’re far too fond of you.”

“What’s going on?”

Mr. Moore turned. Mrs. Hammond had just stepped through the doorway, raven black hair spilling over the shoulders of her lavender satin dressing gown. For once, Rachel was relieved to see her.

“We were just discussing the news of the world, my love,” Mr. Moore said smoothly, crossing the carpet in her direction. Over his shoulder he said to Rachel, “Run along and fetch us some breakfast.”

~

“Well, how do I look?”

Turning in front of the long cheval mirror five days later, Corrine Hammond lowered her lashes and curved her lips into a prim little smile.

“Why, as if you just stepped out of a Gainsborough canvas,” Gerald mocked, leaning against the wall with arms folded. “Her Royal Highness herself would be proud of you.

Where on earth did you get such a . . . hideously modest frock?"

Corrine laughed, slender hands fingering the lace at the severe collar of her turquoise-colored chambray gown. She nodded toward the four gowns lying across her bed. "Madame Beaufort went pale when I described the designs I wanted. When I insisted, she finally gave the job to one of her assistants." She inflected her voice with a heavy accent. "*Je ne sais quoi!* Zee woman's body is to be displayed, like a magnificent painting. Why do you wish to dress like a nun?"

Gerald gave her a knowing smile. "Yet you still couldn't resist having it tight around your little waist, could you?"

"Lord Burke may be a philanthropist, but he's still a man—at least I *assume* he is." She turned to the mirror again and piled her dark hair to the top of her head, angling her face to study the contours of her delicately cleft chin. "While I'm appealing to his more noble instincts, why not capture the attention of his baser ones as well?"

"The poor fellow hasn't a chance. May as well send for the engravers to start on your engagement announcements."

"That might be rushing things a bit, wouldn't you say?" She released her hair to tumble about her shoulders and moved over to sit at her dressing table. Picking up a brush, she said, "I haven't even made his acquaintance yet."

"A detail that will soon be taken care of, I presume? After all, we've been here three weeks now."

"You should know by now that these things take time."

"Of course they do." His voice took on an impatient edge. "But never *this* much time. After all the research I did to choose this poor devil, I should have thought you would have played your hand by now."

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Corrine frowned and pulled the brush through her hair. “You have the patience of a gnat, Gerald. The problem is, you didn’t choose a poor *devil* this time, did you? I had to order a complete new wardrobe . . . unless you prefer I call on him in my green silk. Or perhaps that red sateen you’re so fond of?”

She heard his sigh, his footsteps. His reflection loomed over her in the mirror as her shoulders felt the weight of his hands.

“I have it on good authority that Lord Burke owns three thousand acres in Gloucester,” he said softly, tersely. “He’s the biggest fish we’ve gone after so far.”

“Yes, but the fact that he’s not married worries me,” Corrine admitted. “There is nothing to stop him from going to the police after we’ve bled him dry.”

Gerald shook his head. “The man’s a hermit. He wouldn’t want the publicity, wife or no wife. So I’ll thank you not to question my discernment.”

His know-it-all attitude could be so infuriating. Corrine smirked at his reflection. “Then, I’ll thank *you* not to question my timing. A woman has an instinct about such things.”

“Yes, yes. And your instinct serves us well. But we’re very close to being broke again, and we can’t keep up the rent on this place for much longer if nothing happens.”

“Indeed?” She allowed just a bit of acid into her tone. “I’m glad to hear you’re concerned enough over our finances to give up *gambling*.”

Pain shot through her shoulders. She dropped the brush and reached up to push at his hands. “Gerald, that hurts!”

The grip loosened. He crouched down upon one knee behind her, chin resting upon her shoulder. “Just remember who you were before *I* found you and taught you how to get what you want,” he said. “Would you rather be back milking

cows in Leawick again, keeping house in a broken-down hut with a whining brat and that sot of a husband?"

~

The mention of her former life was enough to send a faint wave of queasiness through Corrine. The daughter of a farm laborer and eldest of nine siblings, she had shared a straw mattress with two sisters in a crumbling stone cottage, where there never seemed to be enough room to breathe—leave alone any privacy. At fifteen she married Thomas Hammond, a railway navvy . . . and the first man to ask her. How he had managed even to muster enough courage to propose was beyond her comprehension, for he could barely speak to her without stuttering—even after they were wed.

The privacy Corrine had left her father's house to find was at last realized. The Great Western Railway was stretching an iron arm out toward Shrewsbury, several miles away, and Thomas was absent for days at a time, boarding in company housing. On his rare homecomings he soon realized that his beautiful wife had no interest in anything he had to say, stutter or not. By the time their child was born a year later, he had discovered that a numbing solace could be found in pints of strong black English stout.

The infant, a girl, was a disappointment. Born with her father's sparse, fawn-colored hair and evidence of what could someday be the same weak chin, she was scrawny from the beginning and cried incessantly to be fed. Corrine resented these demands for nourishment, for they intruded upon her newfound solitude. The child was only a year old when Corrine turned her over to a younger sister during the day and found employment at a neighboring dairy farm.

She met Gerald Moore in the spring of 1856. In those days

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he still lived off the legacy from his grandfather, and had sought out a secluded setting in order to start penning the novel he had yet to complete. An acquaintance had advised White Hart Inn, an old coaching inn three miles from Leawick. He was out in the garden with pen and paper when Corrine passed him with a delivery of cheese and butter.

“I was hoping the muse would visit,” he had said, pale eyes appreciative as he rose to offer assistance with the heavy basket over her arm. “But you’ll do very nicely, little milkmaid.”

“And you can rot, sir,” she had replied, already in a sour mood because Thomas had been home for two days now.

His chuckle had grated in her ears as she continued to the kitchen door, but when she came back outside, he assumed a more humble attitude. “I must beg your pardon for my forwardness, miss. Do say you’ll forgive me.”

“I don’t like fancy gentlemen who make sport of common folk,” she had said with chin raised to show him he could not dent her pride.

“Common folk?” His thin lips had curled into an appreciative smile. “*Common* would be the last adjective I would apply to you, miss.”

“It’s not ‘miss,’” she had said.

“Indeed?” He gave a *tsk* of disappointment. “Lucky fellow, your husband.”

The following morning she returned, but with no deliveries. They left together that day.

That was ten years ago. He had taught her how to dress, how to speak, and how to carry herself around genteel people with a self-confidence just short of arrogance. She owed Gerald everything. And *he* was aware of that as well.



Gerald watched her lips tighten in the mirror.

“I’ll *never* go back, Gerald,” she said. “Even if I have to go it without you.”

“Without me?” He got to his feet. “Then perhaps you should, dear. Your sense of gratitude has been sadly lacking of late.”

“Gratitude? I believe you owe some to me as well.” She twisted upon the bench to glare up at him. “You’ve gambled away every penny of your settlement. I happen to be the only barrier between you and debtor’s prison.”

“You know, Corrine . . . you can be quite the bore,” he said, and turned away.

“Then why don’t you leave if my company bores you so much?”

“Excellent idea.” He started for the door, one step, two, three. He could hear the swishing of the brush through her hair.

“You’ll be back before nightfall,” she said as he turned the knob.

“Not a chance, Corrine.” He pulled open the door.

“Gerald . . .”

“I’ve had enough of waiting upon Your Majesty.”

Stepping out into the corridor, he smiled at the sharp rap of the brush hitting the table, the dull thud of the bench toppling to carpet.

“Please don’t go!”

He was fully out into the corridor now. Her footsteps padded behind him, and suddenly her arms were about his waist. “Don’t leave me, Gerald!” she cried, pressing herself into his back. “I didn’t mean that!”

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“I believe you did,” he said, taking hold of her wrists and turning as he unwrapped her arms. “A man has his pride, Corrine. I believe it’s time to go our separate—”

“No! I love you, Gerald. . . . I’ll *die* if you leave me!”

He released her arms and allowed her to put them about his neck, to lean her head against his shoulder. “There, there,” he soothed, stroking her dark hair. He heard a sound and looked up. Rachel stood near the servants’ staircase landing holding a tray.

“Take it back,” he said.

She made a helpless little motion with her shoulders. “But Mrs. Hammond ordered . . .”

“And *now* I’m ordering you to carry it back downstairs.”

~

Rachel’s whole face burned as she knelt to polish the scrolls carved into the walnut sideboard in the dining room. A half hour after she had poured the tea down the drain, Mrs. Hammond had rung for another pot. It was awful when they fought—and worse when they made up!

She wondered about the man who was to be their next target. Lord Adam Burke, she had overheard them say, a viscount from Gloucester. Was he married, like Squire Nowells and the others before him? Squire Nowells had been a pleasant man, who tipped her sixpence almost every time he called on Mrs. Hammond. Until he hanged himself, and they had to leave Treybrook in a hurry.

Setting the wool cloth on the carpet for a moment, she reached up to tuck the stray honey brown curls tickling the back of her neck into the lace cap on her head. Poor Mrs. Nowells. And her family. Even though the children were all

grown and married, it still had to hurt, losing their father like that. And the scandal it must have caused!

If only Mrs. Hammond and Mr. Moore had never appeared at Saint Luke's Foundling Home in Kingston, south of Canterbury, Rachel's home since infancy. Posing as a married couple over six years ago, the two had offered employment to an older girl. They could not pay much, they had explained in Rachel's presence to Reverend Stockbridge, but they could provide a decent Christian home and adequate meals.

They seemed like angels from heaven that day, for Rachel was on the threshold of her thirteenth birthday, when her stay at the overcrowded institution would have been terminated. Where would she have gone? To the workhouse? Conditions at the orphanage were sometimes harsh, but many a horror story about the workhouses had entered her ears.

I don't mind the hard work, Father, she prayed beneath her breath, lest God think she was lazy and did not deserve his help. After all, even at the orphanage, she had spent the better part of her childhood scrubbing and polishing. Physical labor was as natural to her as breathing. And I do realize our Lord Jesus had a much worse time of it down here. But it's so painful to see them going about hurting people for money's sake! And I hate my part in it!

A shiver snaked down her back as she thought of another, more compelling reason for desiring to leave. Since their little talk in the parlor five days ago, Mr. Moore did not pass her in the corridor without touching her arm or patting her shoulder—if Mrs. Hammond was not with him. Thankfully, he spent most of his days in bed, and left after supper most evenings.

She sought her reflection in the gilt-framed mirror above the sideboard. A pair of somber green eyes stared back at her.

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In her whole nineteen years, no person had ever told her whether she was plain or pretty. But she had good posture, she thought, grateful that Mrs. Stockbridge had admonished her girls to carry themselves erect. In market, Rachel had seen too many servants with rounded shoulders from bending and scrubbing.

Sometimes as she worked, she daydreamed about some decent, kind man coming to her rescue. Like some hero from a fairy tale, he would spirit her away on his horse, tell her she was beautiful. But she wanted no such admiration from Gerald Moore. And she had started locking her door every night.

She had no illusions over his being in love with her. For years she had watched married men succumb to Mrs. Hammond's charms, and had concluded that certain types of men could not be faithful to just one woman. How any woman could settle for a man like that was a mystery to her. *If I ever fall in love*, she thought, *it'll be because the man is faithful and kind, and for no other reasons*. But falling in love was hardly a possibility as long as she lived in this household.

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

You're obviously fond of historical novels. And I obviously am too! Particularly stories set in Victorian England. I love the romance and innovation of the era, and am fascinated by the ironclad rules of convention which governed upper classes and servants alike.

And the dresses! Surely that was when women looked their most feminine. Not that I would wish to spend my days in tight corsets and layers of silk, mind you. Especially down here in south Louisiana!

I do hope you enjoyed *Like a River Glorious*. If you've ever felt trapped by adverse circumstances, have ever been plagued by fear, you may have identified with Rachel Jones. And if you've ever tasted victory (and I hope you have), you know how sweet it was to her when she finally achieved it. I agree with Zig Ziglar, who says, "Happiness is not pleasure; it's victory."

May God bless you with health, faithful friends, and many victories!

Warmly,

Lawana Blackwell