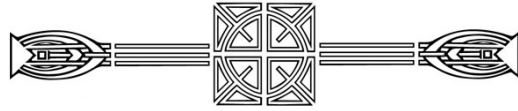


Tales of An English Garden

By Josephine Hymes



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Tale 3: A Tangled Web



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“Oh, what a tangled web we weave

When first we practice to deceive”³

Eleanor took the teacup served by Mrs. Taylor’s maid with a relaxed gesture. Three decades of trust and good friendship mediated between the actress and her hostess. Therefore, she felt confident that the delicate matters that she planned to discuss with the visitor she was expecting were going to remain confidential.

Alicia Taylor nee-Carmichael was Eleanor’s friend since they were understudies in New York, during the early 1890s. Eleanor had gone on to become a bright star while Alicia, three years Eleanor’s senior, had married a young British journalist and moved to London in 1894. At the time, Eleanor had supported her friend when her romance with James Taylor had disrupted her otherwise peaceful life in ways Alicia had not even imagined. James, the young assistant of well-known investigative journalist, was in New York for only a brief period to follow the story of the emerging union movement in the United States. Neither Alicia nor James had planned to fall madly in love in such a short time. Yet before James could understand what he had done, he had proposed to the nineteen-year-old young woman after just a month-long acquaintance. Time was not a luxury they could have, as the young man had to return to London to continue his work, and he was not planning on letting Alicia go.

The young woman had been so overwhelmed with the pressure of making such a life-changing decision that she might have lost the opportunity of a happy marriage, had it not been because of young Eleanor’s encouragement. With a naivete and optimism that one can only command at sixteen, Eleanor had challenged Alicia to see within herself and acknowledge the intensity of her feelings for James. Alicia had never forgotten Eleanor’s emboldening words and how they had allowed her to conquer a fulfilling life with James and the family they raised together.

The two women, who had been inseparable as colleagues, had remained in contact and played an important part in each other’s lives despite the ocean that separated them, as the reader will soon discover.

“So, are you really sure of what you are doing, Ellie?” asked Alicia, leaving her teacup on the side table nearby.

³ Walter Scott in his epic poem “Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field”

Eleanor lifted her intense blue eyes who had been lost in idling observing the light brown liquid in her cup, without drinking much of it.

“Of course, I must talk to him to get things straight, once and for all,” Eleanor replied leaving her tea aside on the marble top of Alicia’s tea table.

“You are giving him a consideration the old fool does not deserve, Ellie”, said Alicia with a smirk on her lips, “last time I checked, he did not give you the same courtesy when he snapped your son from your side”, she added, her tone growing angrier on her friend’s account.

“You know well, I’m not like him. I understand the baby is also his grandson and he must be informed of my intentions and how they may affect any aspirations he may have. Who knows? We might even come to an amicable agreement”.

“In my opinion, making a pact with the devil is too much risk,” chuckled Alicia folding the embroidered napkin she had on her lap.

Eleanor could not contain a half smile from forming on her lips.

“You are not Richard’s best friend, for sure”, Eleanor remarked with glee.

“Well, I never trusted him when he began to pursue you, and you know it . . . More importantly, considering the awful things he did to hurt you and your son, I can only despise him. Besides . . . ” she paused with a twitch in her expression.

“Besides?”

“Well,” added Alicia shrinking her round shoulders that she was covering with an Indian shawl, “I will never forgive him that he forced me to fire the best housekeeper I ever had,” she said with a laughter that did not fool Eleanor as it was accompanied with a fiery look in her hazel eyes.

“You will never drop it, will you?” asked Eleanor trying to make light of the events Alicia was referring to.

“Of course not, I have never met anyone who could make scones like the ones she baked!”

Then the two women burst in laughter remembering good memories of times gone by.

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Richard Grandchester was slowly walking on the solitary sidewalk along Downshire Hill street. He had left his car and chauffeur several blocks behind, waiting for him near a small café, while he made the remaining lap of his journey on foot. He had agreed to meet

Eleanor in the utmost secrecy; so, he was doing his best to comply with her request, leaving his impressive car far behind. He found Hampstead neighborhood clearly changed since he had last been there more than 28 years before. The changes were for the better. He could tell that by the prosperous look of the upper-middle class homes which had been sprouting everywhere, ever more since the end of the war. He knew some intellectuals had favored the area giving Hampstead a sort of refinement that was dignified, if not as luxurious and expensive as the fanciful St. James square area where he lived.

He could tell that Alicia Taylor and her husband had made a good investment in their property before the turn of the century. Taylor seemed to be an intelligent man to judge for his political column and his wife, he paused in his thoughts . . . Well, if Alicia was still the strong and sharp-tongued woman that he had met in 1896, he supposed she had been a skillful stewardess of her husband's modest homestead.

"That woman had something shrewish about her that scares me," he paused thinking of the time he had first visited the Taylor's home in his feverish pursue of young Eleanor.

Unconsciously, he made a sudden stop in his walk as a fleeting thought crossed his mind.

Were the events he lived in 1896 real, or just a dream he once had?

If they were a dream, why could he still hear the buzz in the room of that Gallery in Mayfair as if it still lingered in the air that very evening?

.....

He had entered the threshold of the gallery on a winter afternoon, with the avid thirst for novelty and beauty proper of a twenty-five-year-old man who knows that the world is his for the taking. Richard and his friend Lord Alfred Derry, Earl of C*** were in the mood for some expensive shopping, and that included art as well as entertainment. A friend of a friend had told them that Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and his wife, Lady Laura Alma-Tadema, were showing their latest work that day. Richard had previously bought one of Sir Lawrence's pieces and was curious to see his lady's paintings, which many praised so highly, although these were less commonly found in the market, when compared to her husband's.

The two young men paraded themselves around the room, simultaneously looking at the paintings and the fashionable people who had gathered that lazy and gray afternoon of January. All of a sudden, as Richard's eyes moved curiously about the walls of the gallery, they were captured by a canvas in a gilded frame that made him pause, hold his breath, and in a second, lose the heart he didn't know he had.

On the Canvas, the eyes of a beautiful blond woman seemed to look at the viewer with implacable intensity, striking Richard as the most beautiful lagoons he had ever seen. The young woman, who could hardly be twenty years of age, maybe younger, was dressed in a seventeenth-century silk attire that Lady Alma-Tadema⁴ had painted with great realism. But it was not the striking light and texture of the lavish clothing which made Richard's heart skip a beat, although the painter had certainly captured those details with great skill. No, it was those eyes that looked without looking, those lips that were slightly parted and that he coveted to touch, and the delicate lines of her figure that took Richard's breath away.

"What did you say?" said Richard to his companion whose voice he thought he had heard in the distance.

"Well, I have been talking to you for the last five minutes, but you have simply ignored me like the boor you are," said Lord C*** noticing his friend's sudden trance, "I can see that the lady in the blue dress has captured all of your attention," added Alfred chuckling.

"A woman like that, no, an angel like that," said Richard with his eyes still glued to the canvas, "could make a man go mad. Derry, I must know who she is," he added now looking at his friend with urgency.

"My most esteemed friend going mad for a woman?" asked Alfred Derry jokingly, "we can't have that, of course. Let's ask the artist about her model and we'll soon find a way to secure an introduction for you Richard. But please, do me a favor, will you?

"I knew you were going to put a price to your help," complained Richard to his old classmate, "Say it".

"Don't fall in love, Richard, it does not suit you," replied Alfred cynically.

"Don't be ridiculous, Al," said Richard with smirk, "it will just be fun. After all, one must saw one's wild oats before marriage, isn't that what you have kept saying?"

The two men laughed as they made their way in the room to meet Lady Alma-Tadema.

Finding out the young model's identity had been a rather simple affair. Lady Alma-Tadema could not deny the information, especially when the young Lord Richard had paid so handsomely for her painting. After the revelation was made, it only took the young marquess a few strokes of his pen and a few pennies to send a message to his valet, who

⁴ Laura Alma-Tadema and her husband Sir Lawrence were real painters of certain repute by the end of the XIXth century. Here, she is being referred to as Lady Alma-Tadema (using her husband's last name instead of her first name) as it corresponds to the wife of a Knight. Our protagonist will be referred as Lady Candice (using her first name) as it corresponds to the wife of a peer of England, not a Knight.

was the enabler of all his affairs. When he got back to his father's town house in Saint James' square, the efficient valet had a hot bath ready for him along with his well-ironed tailcoat, a tray with a light meal, and a pair of tickets for Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan* ready for his lordship and his wingman, Lord C***. That same evening, Lord Richard sat on his balcony to lay his eyes on the woman for whom he was already feeling a passionate attraction: a young American actress called Eleanor Baker. From there, to visiting Ms. Baker's dressing room to "pay his respects and admiration for her performance", and invite her for dinner, things moved quite smoothly. That is, until Ms. Baker refused the invitation with a kind but distant smile. The rejection only served to ignite Richard's passion even more.

The following weeks had been spent in a delirious succession of bold attempts to capture Eleanor's favors. Richard had been to the theatre several times, found out the address where Miss Baker was living, sent exuberant flower offerings, and even tried to call unannounced, only to be received by the icy look of a stout and smart-looking woman who was the lady of the house, a certain Mrs. Taylor. That young woman, whose speech revealed her American origin, had treated him without any consideration of his rank in a way that only a newcomer to England could have displayed. Mrs. Taylor had bluntly told him that Ms. Baker was grateful for his attention but did not wish to encourage him, as she was not interested. What insolence!

Having exhausted all the tricks in his book, Richard resorted to his friend Alfred, who suggested an oblique approach instead of the frontal offensive that Grandchester had used so far.

"I've heard that the Alma-Tademas are offering a ball," said Lord C*** with a lopsided smile, "the fact that Sir Lawrence is a Knight and an artist at the same time, allows him to gravitate among intellectuals, gentry, and even some peers. So, when he throws a ball, the event encompasses a wide and interesting range of social groups. Considering that his wife already knows Ms. Baker, it wouldn't be strange if Lady Alma-Tadema invited your Eleanor to her ball. Of course, the Alma-Tademas would be more than flattered if I suggested to them that you would like to be invited. Once at the ball, I trust that you can conjure your devilish charm to do the rest. Does that sound like a plan?"

"You are certainly Machiavellian, Al. I knew I could trust in you to find a solution to this conundrum. Thank you!"

“Don’t thank me yet, idiot. Once the girl is yours, you can buy me a drink at the White’s⁵,” Lord C*** said padding his friend on the shoulder.

. . . .

The matured version of Richard Grandchester, walking through Downshire Hill, could almost hear the first bar of a waltz sounding in the air of his memories. The wind whirl of thirty years of regrets seemed to disappear in his mind to take him back to a room full of men in strict white tie attire and women in silk gowns with trains that rustled at their every step. Where just a few years before the room would have been lit by candles, the Alma-Tademas’ salon was shining with the amber light of electric bulbs. So, after having swept the room with his icy gray eyes, it had not been difficult to identify the unmistakable figure of the object of his desire, wrapped in a light teal dress with brief scalloped bell sleeves and long white gloves. At the first opportunity he had made eye contact with her, it was obvious that his presence had not been taken with indifference by the lady in question. Whether it was interest, precaution, or unwelcome surprise what had changed her previously vacant expression, Richard could not say. However, after the first acknowledgement, Richard did not waste time and approached the lady with his usual assertiveness.

“Ms. Baker, it is a pleasure to see you here,” he had said slightly bowing in front of the young lady.

“Likewise, your Lordship,” Eleanor responded curtsying but without offering her hand for him to kiss it.

Richard noticed the cautious gesture but was not willing to be discouraged by her first sign of resistance to his approach.

“The night promises to be a most pleasant one. This waltz is a favorite piece of mine, wouldn’t it be a pity to let it go without taking the chance to enjoy it as it should be? It would be an honor if you agreed to dance it with me, Ms. Baker”, had Richard prompted the invitation with all the charm he could master.

Eleanor, with her eyes downcast, seemed to be thinking how to respond. The young Marquess was undoubtedly the person of highest rank among the Alma-Tademas’ guests that evening, while she was certainly one of the most socially inconsequential. Still, here they were! He was asking her to dance with him making his best attempt at politeness, and she was seemingly pondering how to respond, perhaps considering the best way to refuse. To Richard’s surprise, the lady had finally nodded and mustered a polite acceptance while

⁵ The oldest gentleman's club in London.

extending her hand for him to lead her to the dance floor. Months later, Richard had heard from Eleanor herself that she had felt forced to accept his invitation to avoid embarrassing the hosts. Deep down, Eleanor knew that dancing with the Marquess, as trivial as it could be, could represent a great peril for her heart as she was already feeling too attracted to that young man of devilish eyes. Unfortunately, her good breeding and her respect towards her hosts made Eleanor feel she had no other option. So, they joined other couples on the dance floor while the slow notes of the waltz began to envelop them in their soft sway.

“Is your lordship partial to Brahms?” Eleanor said, being the first to break the heavy silence that had ensued as they started to dance.

“He is a fine composer, I suppose?” replied Richard slightly nonplused by the apparently disconnected remark.

Richard’s confusion must have been clearly evident on his face as it elicited a soft, yet musical, laughter in Eleanor.

“You just said that this waltz was a favorite of yours,” Eleanor explained in a sweet tone, “this is Brahms’ waltz number 15, if I am not mistaken. So, I was wondering if you liked other pieces of his authorship”.

“I see, the lady is as well versed in music as she is accomplished on the stage,” Richard resorted to flattery to disguise his embarrassment, “Now you must think me a simpleton, not being able to attach a name to the piece I claim to enjoy so much,” he added in a sudden display of honesty.

“Not at all, well-educated people as you surely are, my lord, are not under the obligation of knowing every single irrelevant musical fact. However, I would not be surprised if you had listened to this piece played by the author himself at some point,” Eleanor replied with a sweet tone that contrasted with the arch look and her slightly lopsided smile.

“If she is trying me to go madder than I already am for her, she is succeeding to a painful degree,” Richard thought, mesmerized by Eleanor’s uncanny ability to combine sweetness and condescension.

“I was never musical enough, at least not to the satisfaction of my mother’s high standards. You see, she was truly fond of music and the only one in our family with real taste and knowledge of the art,” Richard explained, resolved to play the honesty card to lower his interlocutor’s defenses, “I clearly remember that she invited Clara Schumann to perform in our home on multiple occasions, when I was a child. She played this waltz several times at my mother’s request, hence my fondness of the piece, despite my inability to attach a label to it”.

Eleanor could not hide her surprise at Richard's peculiar anecdote.

"Your mother must be a true connoisseur to surround herself with such prominent musicians," she admitted.

A sudden cloud appeared on Richard's face. After clearing his throat, he added:

"My mother passed away when I was not yet fifteen," he confessed in tone that revealed he was still marked by the loss.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lord Richard⁶," Eleanor hurried to say, her voice clearly touched, "I also lost my mother at a very young age, but I was raised by her sister, who is also very fond of music and a patroness of all sorts of young artists in New York".

Richard observed that, for a brief second, he had managed to go beyond the barrier of cold politeness that had characterized his previous interactions with the young woman. He was elated to find that there was at least something they had in common. It was just a tiny streak of hope, but one that Richard seized with all his might. His subsequent efforts to win Eleanor's heart soon started to bear fruit. Unfortunately for him, in that pursuit, he had also, most unwillingly, lost his good sense, and set himself on a dangerous path of unrestrained passion, greed, and deceit.

Just four weeks after that first waltz, the young Eleanor had succumbed to Richard's unrelentless courtship. Richard could have called himself the winner of their gallant struggles had it not been for the fact that, in exchange for Eleanor's affection, he had lost his own heart and good judgment. For once Eleanor acknowledged her love for him, Richard was driven to such a level of distraction that he proposed her cohabituate with him with veiled promises of marriage he knew well he was not willing to fulfill. The two of them were like possessed by some kind of gleeful madness that rendered them blind and deaf to all signs and voices that warned them against their affair. In vain did Alicia try to reason with Eleanor when she announced her intentions to cancel her participation in Lady Windemere's Fan for the remaining weeks of the season. In a similar way, Lord C's appeals to reason were unheard when Richard revealed that he would take Eleanor to Scotland for a romantic getaway.

"I told you not to allow yourself to fall in love, Richard, and now you want to take her as your steady lover, not just as an inconsequential conquest! Are you in your right mind? Cohabitation can bring serious consequences!" had said Alfred in disbelief.

⁶ It is customary to refer to the children of a noble man using their first name after the honorific "Lord" or "Lady".

“Oh, don’t dramatize, Derry,” replied Richard making an effort to appear calm and collected, “We’re not in the Middle Ages. The consequences you are referring to can be avoided, you know that. Don’t you?”

“You would be playing with fire, Richard. Who do you think you are? A mill worker from Manchester who can take his paramour to live with him in some sordid slum? By Christ’s sake, Richard! You’re the son of a duke!” was Derry’s serious response.

“Stop fussing. I will be neither the first nor the last nobleman to take a lover. As a man of the world, you should know that this is just a transitory station. I enjoy being with Eleanor, but I know that sooner or later the relationship will go sour, and she will go back to America”.

“Couldn’t you just have some occasional fun without living with her, Grandchester? Neither of the two of you should be thinking of each other in exclusive terms. Let other gentlemen enjoy her company as well.”

“I don’t think she is that kind of girl, Derry,” he responded in a tone that almost sounded adversarial.

“All the more a good reason to desist and find another that can please you without a steady commitment. There are plenty of fish in the ocean, aren’t they?” was Lord C***’s final plea.

“I can’t, Al. I must have her just for me, or I shall go insane,” had replied Richard lowering his voice to almost a whisper.

“You already are, my friend, you already are”.

After this conversation, Richard acted upon his plans with great speed. Before he could realize it, the couple and a maid that Richard had hired to look after Eleanor had taken the road to Carmelhill Villa. There, they spent two memorable months in a state of absolute bliss and utterly oblivious to the world’s conventions.

While Eleanor had truly been an ingenue that first awoke to physical love in Richard’s arms, he had also discovered something unknown in her embrace: A love that was as true and honest as he had never imagined possible. At first, he had done everything he could to deny to himself the nature of his feelings for Eleanor. However, it had taken a seemingly simple incident for him to realize what was happening to him.

One lazy evening in early May, the couple had just returned from an energetic ride over the heather fields on the Grandchesters’ grounds. It had been late for such exercise, but those days they were not keeping regular hours, doing whatever they pleased at the time they felt like it. Still wearing their riding clothes, the couple had sat in the drawing room, waiting for

their only maid to bring some refreshments. Richard glanced at Eleanor's cheeks that were flushed by the exercise. Her blush seemed even brighter under the golden lights of the sunset that filtered through the windowpanes. As he admired her beauty, a new wave of desire began to surge within him. Eleanor, who had begun to recognize that particular look in his eyes, stood up moving herself away from his reach with a playful smile forming on her lips.

"Wait a second, sir," she had challenged him, "There is something I would like to show you before Theresa arrives with the food".

And with that, Eleanor moved to the piano, opening the lid of the piano bench to search among the music scores that someone had long forgotten there.

"Here!" she said when she finally found a single music sheet, "I found this the other night, while you were sleeping. I think you are going to like it".

Without greater ceremony, the young woman opened the piano, placed the score on the music rack, and began to play, singing along in a soft and sweet mezzosoprano voice.

"Once in the dear dead days beyond recall,
When on the world the mists began to fall,
Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng
Low to our hearts Love sang an old sweet song;

And in the dusk where fell the firelight gleam,
Softly it wove itself into our dream.

Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flickering shadows softly come and go,
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,
Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,
Comes Love's old sweet song.

Even today we hear Love's song of yore,
Deep in our hearts it dwells forevermore.
Footsteps may falter, weary grow the way,
Still we can hear it at the close of day.

So till the end, when life's dim shadows fall,
Love will be found the sweetest song of all.

Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flickering shadows softly come and go,
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,

Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,
Comes Love's old sweet song.⁷

Richard knew that old song very well, having heard its lyrical verses countless times. However, as Eleanor sang the words looking at him with the sweetest of affections radiating on her face, Richard Grandchester felt it was the first time he truly understood the song's meaning. He held Eleanor's intense gaze with his for a moment that he wished would last forever, letting every sound from her voice wrap around his heart and creep into a secret recess of his mind, where the memory was stored for the years to come. When the last sound of the song vanished in the twilight air, Richard Grandchester understood that he was in love. After the realization sunk in his mind, he panicked!

A new fear of not being able to follow his original plans made him restless to the point that he decided that a change of scenery was needed. So, he proposed Eleanor to continue their love affair in Paris; suffice to say that Eleanor received the proposal with great enthusiasm. Despite these measures, by midsummer a new piece of news, one that was even more disturbing than the realization of his irrevocable love for Eleanor, made Richard fall into despair: Eleanor was pregnant.

This fact came to him in a violent manner one evening after Eleanor had accidentally fainted while they both were dining at Le Procope⁸. Worried about her health, Richard had insisted on having a doctor check on his "wife". When the physician reported his diagnosis, it took Richard some painful minutes to fully comprehend the revelation. A complex mixture of feelings jammed his reason without letting him think straight for a good while. Joy and pride at the prospect of having a child with the woman he loved had been there, but also disbelief, concern, and fear had been part of his emotional upheaval.

How could it be possible? He had been careful to avoid a pregnancy, as he had been taught since his youth. Of course, it was not that he had used "a little something for the weekend"⁹ with Eleanor, as he could not fear contracting a contagious disease from a woman for whom he had been the first and only lover. However, he had always being careful to withdraw on time . . . Hadn't he? Could he be absolutely certain when his thirst for her seemed unquenchable, drawing him to her on a daily basis?

It had taken him all his willpower to compose himself to talk to an enraptured Eleanor without giving away his internal turmoil. In his tormented mind, Richard repeated to

⁷ This song is entitled "Love's Old Sweet Song" and was written by James Lynam Molloy and Graham Clifton Bingham in 1884.

⁸ A well-known café in Paris that has been running for centuries.

⁹ Euphemism for "condoms", which were at the time well-known but usually reserved for intercourse with prostitutes.

himself that breaking a relationship once reality took over infatuation was one thing, but abandoning his own flesh and blood to be raised away from him was entirely a different matter. Nonplused by the circumstances, he had made the worst decision of his entire life, travelling to England to inform his father of his predicament and seek his advice.

When Richard got to N*** House, he found that his father was not in the best mood. The fact that the Parliament session was likely to prolong beyond July that year, threatening to ruin the beginning of the hunting season for him, was not a minor nuisance for his lordship. However, that was the smallest of Graham Grandchester's grievances that summer. His lawyers had recently handed in a report of Richard's latest dalliance, and he was eagerly, and angrily, waiting the first opportunity to demand Richard to end his scandalous romance with the American actress. However, what Lord N*** was not prepared to hear was that the woman was pregnant. When Richard delivered such news with an unapologetic face, it took Lord N*** all the power of his phlegmatic disposition to control his initial urge to beat his child. The colors drained from His Grace's face and for a moment that seemed like an eternity for Richard, the duke remained silent. After that pause, the man, who was sitting at his desk, finally began to speak as he continued to inspect a pile of papers.

"I see. That development is indeed an unexpected complication", the duke responded in a business-like fashion, "I'll call Sutton to get his legal counsel today and give you an answer tomorrow by this time".

Richard, who knew his father's coldness quite well, was not surprised by that reaction, but had hoped that the prospect of a grandchild would have warmed his father's heart to support his cause. He was wrong.

The following day, the appointment with his father and his lawyer, Gregory Sutton, did not go in the direction Richard had hoped for.

"I expect that you have the good sense to acknowledge that this liaison of yours is not something I can approve of," said Lord N*** to begin the conversation.

"I understand, father, but it is now a fact we cannot ignore," had been Richard's calm but defying first response.

"Certainly. It must be addressed in a manner that is befitting of a Grandchester. This is to say, this connection must be severed as soon as other concerns allow it."

"By other concerns you mean the child, I suppose," said Richard with a bitter tone.

“Of course. Since you have been so careless, you have put our House in a most compromising position. If the pregnancy leads to the birth of a boy, the child would be a bastard. We could not consider him as the next in line to the dukedom”.

“While the child is still unborn, I could marry the mother, making him a legitimate heir,” said Richard seeing the opportunity to make his case, “And **we** would finally have a spare,” he had concluded with the one argument that he knew could move his father’s will in his favor.

While other noble families would have dealt with the prospect of a child born from a socially inappropriate relationship in a dismissive manner, the Grandchesters did not have that luxury. For the three previous generations a series of unfortunate events, such as offspring dead in infancy or during the Napoleonic and the Crimean wars, had reduced the family to only one viable heir: Richard. Lord N***’s refusal to remarry after his wife’s death had not helped the cause either. So, the prospect of a second viable heir was not a minor thing for the two men, especially for Lord N***, who secretly knew his days were numbered and was eager to see his line secured with a spare before the inevitable happened.

“Yes, that would be an unexpected positive outcome of a very unwise decision,” rejoined Graham Grandchester, “but our house cannot abide such an inconvenient and unequal match”.

“I’m afraid we cannot have the child without the marriage, father,” was Richard’s immediate reply in a futile effort to dissuade his father.

“Sutton has informed me of a number of things that we could do to avoid social and political disaster,” indicated Lord N*** signaling his lawyer that it was his turn to explain the possible strategies.

“That is right,” began Sutton, “there is a way that your lordships could keep the child as legitimate heir, in the happy event that it was a boy, of course, but we will need the willing participation of a third party”.

Richard did not say a word but with a slight nod he indicated Sutton to elaborate.

“If a lady of a family of repute was willing to marry your lordship and take the child as her own, it would be possible to keep him as the next in line.”

“I cannot believe my ears, Sutton. Are you proposing me to turn my life into the enactment of a *sensation novel*¹⁰?” asked Richard scornfully.

¹⁰ A fictional genre popular in the 19th century that depicted scandalous events that could include kidnapping, adultery, forgery, or seduction.

“Not at all, sir. It is a feasible plan”.

Richard didn't know whether to feel disgusted or amazed at his lawyer's words.

“Allow me to find your plan problematic at multiple levels, Sutton,” had been Richard's audible response, “For starters, where on Earth are we going to find a lady of a family of repute, a peer's daughter for that matter, to agree to playing the third wheel in this undignified menage-a-trois?”

“Well, Richard” intervened his father, “there is certainly a lady that is in the position to accept this offer and even consider it as the best one she can get in her entire life.”

Richard remained silent for a second as something in his mind suddenly clicked.

“You, sir, cannot be speaking seriously. Are you referring to Lady Beatrix? Hadn't you said that you were going to talk to Lord D*** and break the engagement on account of all the damning information provided by your men?”

“I assure you, I'm in earnest, Richard,” replied the duke, “I did not follow through with our plans to cancel your engagement when I was notified of your escapade to Paris. And I'm glad I didn't. Now we have a good candidate to participate in this plan and save our good name. As ironic as it may seem”.

“Ironic indeed, sir, for you would be marrying me to a woman who has already demonstrated she is not to be trusted!”

“Well, if you cared so much about getting a more trustworthy candidate, you should have worked on that this blasted season instead of making a fool of yourself with an unsuitable woman. This is a web you have laboriously worked on weaving, Richard,” riposted the duke with a dispassionate tone that did not match with the gravity of his accusations.

“But a lifetime with Beatrix, sir”, said Richard with a regretful voice that seemed almost like a plea, “It was already a prospect I loathed when I thought she was an acceptable match. And now, knowing what we know about her, I can't imagine myself by her side, trusting in her to play the mother of my son, for that matter!”

“I know, Richard, and it is not without qualms that I have decided to offer you this scheme,” responded Lord N***, “but on this sad day, you are offered three options and none of them will fully satisfy you or me. Marry your lover and keep this child and any other she may give you, but neither her nor your children will ever be well received among our peers, not to mention they would never cross the threshold of Buckingham Palace. When you take my place, she will be the weakness that all your enemies will use against you; she will reduce your political and social prospects; and you will condemn her to a life of

loneliness, for nobody in our circle will ever befriend her. If that prospect does not appeal to you, then go back to Paris and break her heart now, offer her enough money to make her independent and let her go. The child will be born a bastard, and she will be free to find a father for him or her whenever and wherever she pleases. In that option, you can also break your engagement with Beatrix and seek a new and more agreeable candidate elsewhere, but you must make haste and marry by the end of next season. It is about time for you to produce a viable spare for the Grandchester family. The third option, you already know it," concluded His Grace with a somber voice.

The cruelest realization sank into Richard's heart. He was trapped!

Torn by the prospect of losing Eleanor and her child, the young man had asked his father for time to consider but was only offered twenty-four hours to make up his mind. In the sleepless night that ensued, he wrestled with the opposed alternatives his father had offered. In his torment, Richard saw the image of a child of his being raised by another man just as clearly as he imagined Elenor becoming a duchess and a social pariah at the same time. He also so the ruins of a family that had remained in the good graces of the Crown for centuries. He could not be the cause of its fall! With his heart torn by those options that seemed to him so unbearable, he decided to put his family's good name and the future of his potential son above all, even though the alternative forced him to betray his love for Eleanor. So, not without great pain, he chose to go along with Sutton's suggested ruse.

Once that fateful decision was made, convincing Lady Beatrix and her father, Lord D***, was the next thing to be solved. It had not been easy, but the evidence of Beatrix's affair with her cousin, the future Earl of M***, was so damning that the family had agreed to the scheme to avoid the scandal.

Coincidentally, Beatrix's family had recently suffered the loss of one of their members. So, they thought the situation offered them the perfect excuse to argue that the expected wedding between Lord Richard Grandchester and Lady Beatrix had been celebrated, with special license, in an intimate family gathering as it corresponded to a family still in mourning. The plan was for the couple to start their so-called married life away from London and then use Lady Beatrix's supposed poor health as an excuse to keep her away from active social life for over a year, while the situation with the baby could be resolved.

As Eleanor was settled in France, it was thought that all that was needed was to keep her there, ignoring all the agreements that had been made regarding her child and her own future. As soon as the wedding with Beatrix was made public in England, Richard would travel again to France and move Eleanor from Paris to a secluded place in the countryside. This move would keep her oblivious to the news of Richard's wedding and hidden to British

society, while she waited for the birth of the child. After the birth had taken place, if it was a boy, Richard would break with Eleanor, taking the child with him. If the child were a girl, he would leave the baby with her mother, offer financial assistance, and end the relationship anyway. In such a case, Richard's marriage to Lady Beatrix would have to be honored. It would remain in Beatrix's hands to keep her marriage successful by being faithful to her husband. If her infidelities continued, she would be discarded with a scandalous divorce and the search for a new duchess would ensue.

That was, at least, the plan that Richard agreed with his father and lawyer to follow. Secretly, however, he expected that Eleanor could be persuaded to remain his lover. Life would teach Richard that not only his unacknowledged plans were unrealistic, but also his father's carefully crafted legal scheme could be set out of course when confronted with the unpredictability of human reactions.

Unfortunately for the Grandchesters, Eleanor was not kept ignorant of Richard's marriage to Beatrix as they had planned. Although the news about the marriage were kept very low-key with a single and discrete note in the London Times, someone in Town decided that that news should reach beyond the English Channel. For, you see, dear reader, when Mrs. Taylor read the shocking note, she cut it out and mailed it via Express delivery as a warning to Eleanor of the danger in which she was.

When Richard returned to Paris, to his great dismay, instead of his loving and naive Eleanor, he found a letter that seemed to have been penned by someone whose innocence had been crushed by reality. The memory of those words was indelibly imprinted in his mind:

Dear Lord Richard,

I have been abruptly awakened from a dream In it, I had fancied you honorable and true and myself as the fortunate owner of your heart. A note in the newspaper sent by a real friend has disabused me of my mistaken notions. The realization has been brutally painful, but I have welcomed it because the truth is preferable to a fool's delusion.

Please, forget about me and my child, your lordship. I have family, friends, and a country that will not desert us. I wish you and your new wife all the happiness that your circumstances can allow.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Le Breton

.....

Richard's present-self sighed heavily at the memory of the subsequent chain of unfortunate events that had surrounded his love-and-hate story with Eleanor. As he arrived at the address he had been seeking, the sight of the door, still painted in the same shade of blue, brought a different, much more unpleasant memory. He saw himself knocking at that door hoping to extract some information about Eleanor's whereabouts from her friend Alicia Taylor. Richard had crossed the English Channel in a desperate attempt to locate his pregnant mistress. He remembered how his heart, pounding like a blacksmith hammer, seemed so loud to him that he was scared Alicia would hear it when she opened the door to answer his call. Unsurprisingly, the young Mrs. Taylor's response had been implacable.

"How dare you to come to my home to demand such information, your lordship," was Alicia's harsh response, "You have seduced, betrayed, and humiliated an underage young lady of a decent family. She gave you her heart, her honor, and even risked a promising career and for what?" riposted Alicia with evident fury in her voice and on her flustered face, "So that you can repay her kindness with treachery of the worst kind? No, sir! If you think I will help you find her, you are terribly mistaken".

"There is a baby coming and I am the father! She cannot deny me the right to know my child. The baby will be a Grandchester and must be raised as one", to which Alicia had responded with a scornful chuckle.

"Your right was lost to you, sir, when you decided for a marriage of convenience. Do not trouble yourself, this baby will be provided with everything a child needs by a loving and courageous mother. Leave them alone, Lord Richard, and please do not come knocking at my door ever again!" She had concluded, closing the door to his perplexed face.

Richard could hear Alicia's angry words still sounding in his ears. He wondered at the irony of the current moment, coming again to the same place **where had been dismissed 29 years before.** He knew well that Alicia Taylor had sufficient reasons for not being thrilled at his visit. Not only he had been the cause of her best friend's sufferings, but he had also resorted to treachery using his valet to seduce Alicia's only maid and surreptitiously obtain Eleanor's address in New York. And that had been only the beginning of a long chain of lies, betrayals, and selfish decisions that had cost endless pain for himself as well as for those he claimed to love. Nevertheless, here he was, knocking at the same blue door. He only hoped that, on this occasion, time and experience would allow him to act in a more just and judicious manner. Seizing this hope, Richard Grandchester knocked at the blue door. Only, this time, it was not the lady of the house, but a young maid who opened and invited him to come in.

When Richard entered the tidy and well-lit parlor, he could not see Alicia in the room. Only Eleanor with her always impeccably dressed self was there to receive him. She was sitting on a wing-back chair and with a gesture invited him to occupy a velvet settee opposite her.

The former lovers exchanged pleasantries while the maid brought the tea service. Once the young woman finished her task and left them alone closing the door behind her, the duke was the first to speak.

“I see you have chosen a direct approach, Richard”, she responded passing a filled cup to Richard, “and I’m glad for it. What we have to discuss must be addressed without going around the bushes”.

“Candice, our sweet girl, as any new mother, has concerns about her son’ future,” she began.

“She asked me if I would be willing to be acknowledged as little Richard’s grandmother. This is, for the child to know me as such as he grows up.”

“Candy does not want for this child, and others that she and Terry may have, the burden of a family secret. She is fully aware how such things weighed terribly on Terry’s childhood,” Eleanor elaborated with a neutral and calm voice.

"I suggested that, and also told her that the decision was not entirely my own, as there were other people involved. I, of course, was not specific as to whom I was referring to".

“I appreciate the consideration and also the discretion, Eleanor”.

The lady simply nodded her head, accepting the duke’s courtesy. Then she continued.

“That being said, Richard, Candice’s concerns made me reflect that we need to revisit the agreements we reached about my role in Terry’s life. Many years have passed since and circumstances have certainly changed”.

“You can say that again, Eleanor,” said the duke with a brief puff of air escaping his lips that for a moment Eleanor mistook as a sigh, but she immediately discarded that interpretation telling herself that the Richard Grandchester she knew would never sigh in front of anyone.

“We made many promises at the time, Eleanor, many of which we did not keep, and then hoped that things would work out for the best interest of . . . of **our** son,” Richard said, first with hesitation and then hurriedly uttering the word “our” as if he was afraid to acknowledge the undeniable connection, “only to realize later, in my case in the most bitter manner possible, that what I had done in the name of his well-being and happiness had mostly either failed or being counterproductive”.

Eleanor lowered her eyes in silent acknowledgement of the part she had played in their poor parental decisions.

“I’m afraid that is correct. Many of those . . . those agreements,” she continued struggling to find the right words, “are not standing anymore. Terry is a grown-up man who has built a life of his own, not depending on you or what your lineage represents. He is fully aware of who I am to him, and our relationship has long been repaired. However, I suppose there is one fundamental thing still standing that I’m sure remains important for you.” Eleanor paused here to gather courage and breath to utter what followed, “I am referring to the matter of the dukedom’s succession,” Eleanor finally said, allowing the elephant in the room to be acknowledged.

“Indeed,” was Lord N***’s short reply.

“I suppose you still see Terry as your heir although he has been away from your world for over ten years now,” she continued trying to force Richard to voice his expectation.

“Yes, Eleanor. It is not a secret for my peers that Terrence is a wayward son who has chosen an unorthodox lifestyle and married beneath his station.”

Eleanor flinched at this last remark.

“And I say this last thing not without great disgust, because I am aware of Candice’s value. She is certainly the best thing that ever happened to him, but more than one in my circle

would raise their eyebrows at Terrence's choice. Nonetheless, that is not a capital sin. He is still acknowledged as the first legitimate child of my marriage with the one I will not name, and by consequence my heir apparent".

Eleanor moved in her seat, clearly uncomfortable about the direction of the conversation, but she did not interrupt her interlocutor.

"I can also say that Terrence's position as my heir is secured despite his stepmother's animosity".

"Many years ago, you were eloquent enough to inform me about her," Eleanor paused in search of the appropriate words, "her indiscretions. I am aware that you have been effective in keeping her under control with the threat of a scandal so far. However, you will allow me the right to remain skeptical about your power to contain her tongue in the future, Richard," Eleanor interjected elegantly adding sugar to a second cup of tea.

For the first time in the conversation, the duke lowered his eyes and made a very brief pause.

"I admit that, in the past, I lied to you in many ways", he finally continued, his voice a fraction lower than before, "I am most ashamed of my procedure. So much that I accept that my acts are beyond forgiveness. It is because of this awareness that I understand you may be reluctant to believe me".

Eleanor stopped steering her teaspoon and darted her eyes towards Richard with a questioning look. The duke's continued, but it was obvious that he was advancing into mined territory with great hesitation when he said:

"Please, forgive me for unearthing things that otherwise should not be revisited. But certain events must be readdressed to clarify why I have strong reasons to say that the expected opposition has been carefully disarmed. Allow me to elaborate why." At this point, he briefly stopped taking air before he began: "While I did not share intimacy with her during all the time you and I lived together in New Jersey".

A pair of very cold blue eyes darted a warning towards Richard at the daring mention of their past relationship. "*Be careful with what you are going to say next, Richard*" her eyes seemed to say. He understood the mute message but did not desist from moving forward with his story.

"I don't deny that things changed once I became duke, as I thought I had to . . . do my duty to provide a spare for my House".

“Of course you did,” Eleanor rejoined with a sardonic half smile, “There is nothing new there, Richard, and I do not see the purpose of this conversation”.

“Let me finish what I need to say”, he replied, “I promise there’s a purpose for this distasteful story”.

She shrunk her shoulders as a sign that he could proceed.

“Those interactions with her were merely out of duty. However, knowing her previous transgressions when we were promised, I had professionals to watch her moves”.

“Really?” interrupted Eleanor, raising her left brow, “that measure was beneath you, Richard”.

“Yes, I did that base thing, as you put it, but don’t regret it. This precaution allowed me to discover that as soon as she felt she could pass the consequences of an affair as the result of her marital duties, she sought to mend fences with her former lover, and he did not refuse her”.

He made a pause here, disposing his cup of tea and standing up, unable to continue his story while looking at Eleanor in the eye. He moved towards the window and opened it with the intention of allowing the air in to start smoking.

“I let her think she had fooled me,” he continued “and waited until the so-called spare was born to reveal my knowledge to her. I cornered her with this knowledge and the evidence provided by those I had hired to follow her moves. Then, as we had done before marrying each other, we negotiated, but this time we included her cousin in the negotiation”.

Eleanor was about to say something about that distasteful “menage-a-trois”, but kept silent, allowing him to continue with his tale.

“She knew well I was entitled to file for divorce. This course of action, if followed, would bring all those undesirable things she had tried to avoid when she married me, in the first place: a scandal, social disrepute, ostracism, and a remarkable descent in her financial situation. She was adamant to avoid all those dire consequences”.

“That is hardly surprising,” Eleanor riposted while he opened his gold case to extract one of the cigarettes it contained.

“I was prepared for that opposition. It was then that I offered to keep the ridiculous charade we had started when we got married, without the implied intimacy duties that were attached to a marriage. I offered her freedom to continue her affair with that man or any other if she pleased, and even conceive other children in that manner”.

“I never imagined you could be so liberal, Richard,” Eleanor replied scornfully, “Many of your peers would have brought fire and brimstone upon her if they had been in your place. You know history proves many have done so. After all, it is only the woman who loses in such dreadful games”.

“You know very well that I had no such luxury; she was privy to a secret she could use to retaliate,” he admitted behind the first puff of smoke of his recently lit cigarette.

Eleanor understood that he was referring to Terry’s position as legitimate son and heir. She already knew that part of the story. Yet, it was only at this moment that the extraordinary importance that Richard gave to the matter hit Eleanor with force. He had been willing to make such an undignified arrangement and live with it for decades to keep his true son as his heir.

“In this extraordinary transaction,” Richard continued, “there were some conditions, of course. First, she would act in absolute discretion, never lowering her guard. To keep appearances, once again, the children would be all registered as my own, and as such, they would enjoy the privileges attached to my lineage, including the education and connections that could later help them make advantageous marriages, allowing them to continue living on a similar style as adults”.

“A generous proposal, indeed,” interrupted Eleanor.

“Yes, that was generous of me, but I also had other conditions”.

Eleanor thought that such a move did not surprise her.

“The second condition was regarding her son and all those other possible children that could come. I demanded the true father to provide the necessary funds to allow those children an independent living from the moment each one of them finished school, until they could marry according to their station. For his daughter, he would also provide the dowry. Of those funds, I would be named the steward and be considered responsible for maintaining them and making them grow, if possible, until they were turned out to each child when they became of age or married”.

He now looked at her, but she did not show intentions of taking a new turn in the conversation. So, he continued.

“The third condition was, of course, the most important. She would never disclose Terrence’s true origin beyond the small circle that was already aware of the truth. More importantly, she and her son would never be entitled to dispute Terrence’s right as my heir and successor. If she did that, my lawyers would reveal her agreements with me and file a petition to declare the dukedom extinct, as currently there are no other living heirs”.

This last revelation was the first one in the evening that made Eleanor pause in disbelief. Suggesting the possibility of leading his multigenerational legacy to an end was certainly something she never imagined Richard would do.

“You must be pretty sure that her claims for the paternity of your so-called children are totally unfounded”.

“The case is indisputable. Not only do I have plenty of evidence of her life-long dalliances and signed contracts of our agreement, but last year I added a new piece to my arsenal of defense. A new blood test proving that I did not father those children”.

“Is that even possible, Richard?” asked Eleanor visibly intrigued.

“Yes, it is possible. It is a new technology that has already been used for legal disputes over paternity in Germany¹¹. It is still in development and not always accurate, but in my case, its accuracy cannot be disputed”.

“And I suppose that you, being such an expert on this matter, have grounds to believe that there is no uncertainty in your case. I wonder why that is so,” she challenged him.

“I’m surely not an expert, but those who have given me counsel are scientists who work at the avant-garde of this discovery. The truth of the matter is that I am the possessor of a very rare blood type. One that could have never derived into the blood type of her children¹². She and her children have everything to lose if she ever dared to claim the title for her eldest”.

Eleanor did not respond to that new piece of information, taking her time to process the weight of Richard’s words.

“So, as you see,” he continued, “on my part, I had cladded my deal with her to a point that it is unbreakable. However, if a third party, totally unconnected to her or her children, offered proof that Terrence is your son as well as mine, they would be in the position to appeal to the Crown, requesting my son’s legitimacy status to be revoked. If Terry is to be viewed as a bastard, that would undo the deal, leave that woman and her progeny exposed, and destroy my family legacy of over a thousand years, all in one single thrust.”

At this point Eleanor could not follow Richard’s logic and required clarification.

¹¹ Blood tests were first used in legal paternity disputes in Germany in 1924. They were not entirely effective to prove paternity in a positive sense (that a man was indeed someone’s father) but are still effective to disprove claims of paternity (showing that a particular man could not be the father of a person with a particular blood type)

¹² Here, it is suggested that the duke’s blood type is AB, a very rare type that cannot produce offspring with the O type.

“I understand that such a revelation would ruin Terry’s prospects, but how would that affect her and her children?” she asked with a movement of her head that showed she was skeptical.

“In the event of such an unfortunate outcome, whether I am alive or dead, my lawyers have instructions to expose the duchess’ treachery. Her descendants would be declared bastards as well, losing their name, and suffering the public scorn along with all my house,” he concluded with his gray eyes turning dark as native platinum under his thick and frowning eyebrows.

Eleanor felt that a cold spasm crept along her spine, turning the fine hair of her neck stand on its end. Richard Grandchester was not an enemy one should risk having. An uncomfortable silence then ensued, without none of them knowing, for a few seconds, how to handle it.

“I understand your retaliation towards her, especially considering her cruel treatment of Terry,” she finally dared to break the silence, “but her children!”

Behind a thick smoke cloud, the duke raised his eyebrow in a disdainful gesture.

“You should not concern yourself on their account, Eleanor. Their mother did all that she could to spoil them and make them annoyingly superficial and vane, those three. In the case this undesirable event we have been speaking of ever happened, it may do them some good to get off their high horses and have a little taste of reality,” was Richard’s impassive response, “It is not like they are going to end on the streets of London, of course, but even if it were so, my resolve would not be shaken. I will not allow a man totally unconnected to me by blood to take my place as the next duke of N***. That will not ever happen. Be sure about that!”

“I understand,” rejoined Eleanor still debating the implications of Richard’s revelations.

“The actual matter at stake here, Eleanor,” he continued, “is how you plan to proceed. In the past, it was me the one scheming and making all the decisions. Time has shown how bad I am at doing that. So, this time I will let you take the reins of your own destiny and that of our son and his descendants”, he concluded putting off his cigarette on an ashtray that was laying down on the tea table. With that gesture, he came back to sit on the settee, waiting for Eleanor to respond.

“How generous of you, Richard,” she responded with a scornful chuckle, “You weaved a tangled web and now you are leaving me the task to untangle it. It is I who should give or deny my son the right to inherit an enormous fortune, one that he obviously disdains, but a considerable one, nonetheless. It is I who should decide the end or the continuity of a

family heritage that goes back to the Dark Ages. It is I who should say if an honest man should take a place at the House of Lords and do something for the greater good of this country”.

“Yes, said in a succinct manner, all those decisions are up to you now,” he said plainly, “I’m sorry for burdening with such a task. All I can do is promise you that this time I will do nothing to stop you from acting in the way you deem is best for you and Terry’s future”.

Eleanor thought that was an evening of unlikely revelations and even more surprising outcomes. Seeing Richard Grandchester put the destiny of his illustrious family in her hands was something she did not expect to ever happen. After all, this same man had been the one to discard her as unworthy of occupying the place of his duchess and mother of their child, all for the sake of his family name. Could a man be so changed? And more importantly, what had truly triggered such transformation?

“I appreciate the trust, Richard” was her audible response, “I will need some time to consider this matter and when I have done that to my satisfaction, I will inform Terry and Candy of the role I will take in Ricky’s life. I will only reveal what is strictly necessary, of course”.

“How will I know your decision?” he asked with a hint of wistfulness in his voice.

“I will write to your lawyer, if that is acceptable to you.”

“That is a sound plan,” he replied, thinking that his relationship with the mother of his child was now reduced to a business transaction that required a lawyer as a mediator. And he had nobody to blame for that sad outcome but himself.

When Richard finally got to his car that evening, he allowed his head to rest on the leather upholstery of the backseat. He was exhausted!

“It was done!” he told himself as he instinctively put his right hand on his chest. An increasingly familiar pang reminded him that the emotions of the day had taken a toll on him. He reached for a small box in the pocket of his jacket from which he extracted a small pill. Without ceremony he immediately swallowed it.

“Perhaps I should pay attention to my doctor and give up smoking,” he told himself as the car began moving. He would be leaving London for Arundel Park the following day to spend the Christmas season with a family that was not truly his. Unlike him, Eleanor would be surrounded by those she loved the most.

“Poetic justice,” he thought.