

A TALE FEW FOLKS WOULD WANT TO HEAR

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Sarah sat at the mirror pinning up her hair the way he seemed to like it and listening for his carriage outside. She would know by the sound because it was one of those new modern carriages whose axles didn't creak, even on the crazy cobblestones of Uther Lane. Sarah had peeped out the house's front window once for a look at it and "Mrs. Hawkins," she had said, "it's quite enough to take your breath away, ain't it." The thing was massive, and as fancy as the gentleman himself, with six lanterns large enough for night-riding and an oil painting on the black-lacquered door showing a house set castle-like on an emerald green hill. His carriage looked bigger from the outside than the whole cottage Sarah had grown up in.

She paused with a hairpin at her nape, thinking she'd heard the wheels. Mrs. Hawkins hadn't even needed to tell her to expect the gent. It was Wednesday afternoon, and no doubt he'd knock as usual precisely on the stroke of four. That's what made him a real gentleman, the knocking before he strode in. Some of them just strode in the door in their dirty boots with nary a word and undid their flies, ready to get it over with and take off again, flinging silver and coppers that got lost in the sheets.

Not that he was a talkative gent, exactly. But he was too smart and too high-up to talk to the likes of a Sarah anyway. No, he'd take his breaches off and have his usual way with her in his shirt and embroidered socks, then sit in the brown armchair with a glass of brandy and stare into the fire thinking God knew what for an hour, then have her again the other way round and with a murmured, "Well, goodbye," leave the coins in the clay

cup by the door without making so much as a tiny chink. *Discreet*, that's what he was. *Reserved*. Difficult, too, she would guess. She had seen him be curt when the brandy was not as it should be. She only knew he liked her hair up because she'd noticed him noticing it a couple of times, with a possible look of approval in his eyes.

It was her bulk he seemed to like, and she shifted it in the creaking chair in anticipation. It wasn't every man who liked as full a woman as Sarah, but once he'd been to the house he'd asked for her specifically and now she'd been his regular Wednesday going on two years. The way he looked at her hips and bust and especially her behind – that was how she knew. Maybe, she liked to think, he was wishing some of his scrawny ladies on his emerald hill had all she had. Maybe he even wished Sarah's size on some hipless, bust-less and bum-less lady in particular. The gentleman didn't wear a wedding band, but that didn't signify. Ladies, and very high-up ladies at that, must have flocked to him, what with his money, and his looks, which were not bad a-tall when you got used to his glowering brows. Monsieur Bonaparte, she sometimes thought, probably had such.

She only hoped she wouldn't bust out crying while he was here. There'd been a letter from Sheffield. Mrs. Hawkins had read it to her briskly in the corridor, then thrust it into her hand and gone about her business. Sarah's mother was in a bad way, but there'd be no getting there – not as far as Sheffield, not if Mrs. H had anything to do with it. The letter lay, folded and impenetrable, on the bedside table right now. The sight of it in the mirror made Sarah's eyes well up.

Sarah started, hearing his double knock at the door. The letter had made her miss the sound of his carriage and the chime of the front-hall clock, and she plumped her

breasts quickly inside her bodice, rising as he strode in. Luckily he was distracted for a moment, turning the “occupied” sign on the outside of the door.

“Good afternoon, sir,” she said, making a little curtsy. She knew that that always sort of amused him. Today he turned away so fast she executed it behind his back.

“Welcome.”

“Afternoon.” The word was almost inaudible, and the brows were very dark today. Immediately he leaned his cane in the corner and threw off his coat and threw himself into the chair by the door and put his boot up for removal.

“It’s good to see you, sir,” she said as she knelt to take it off. He did not seem to hear her. “Something to drink, would you like? To start?”

“What? No.”

He held up the other foot and she slid the other boot off. Almost abstractedly he plunged his hands down her dress and felt her bubbies, weighing and kneading them but his mind was clearly elsewhere. She presented herself as fully as possible and writhed a little and murmured, “Oh, yes, sir, very nice, very nice.” Leaving off abruptly, he began to undo his flies.

Sarah went to the bed and put her foot up on the rail and pulled up her stockings, making sure to lift her hem and show her behind. She knew he liked that, too. Indeed, he glanced over and took in the sight with a bit more interest. She affected not to notice his gaze, and continued tugging the white tops over her thighs and redoing the ribbon-garters until he said, “All right. Enough.”

He was ready and stood on the carpet waiting for her, and she knelt and lent him her mouth.

“Take that off and get on the bed,” he said after a while, and she climbed onto the bed and he climbed between her thighs and tendered himself. No better or worse than many another, he was done in a minute or so of quick exertion. As always, his eyes went down to her bush and he murmured, “*Cunt, cunt, pretty cunt*” as if for a signal, and then with a further distortion of his naturally curled lip and a strangled moan he began to come and, as instructed by him long ago, she said his name over and over again until he had finished. He did not like to be touched afterward, and Sarah lay beside him pretending to be in a blissful half-dozed, her eyes half-open, watching him. She thought of all his money.

All at once he was up and slumping into the brown armchair before the fire, where he threw himself down, already in a brood.

“Would you like some brandy, sir?” she asked as if she had never seen the man before.

“Brandy. Yes.”

She rang and the girl brought the bottle and glass and she poured for him. He took the glass without a word and uncharacteristically downed half of it and held it out for more. She poured. He stared into the flames, brows in a knot. Crossing to set the bottle on the vanity she saw a piece of paper sticking out of the pocket of his coat. The candle was right there and Sarah saw that it was a lady’s fine paper and probably a lady’s hand, by the open scrawl. So he had got a letter, too? In any case she was free for a while. She knew he would sit there some time and brood in silence. But no. Not this week.

“*Fuck*,” he said under his breath. The crudeness and inadvertent self-revelation of the curse was a novelty. “More,” he said thickly, holding out his glass, adding as an afterthought, “please.”

Another novelty. She got the bottle and poured standing beside him and felt his gaze on her face. When she’d finished pouring her eyes met his and she stood there.

“What’s your name?” he said.

She almost said “Nancy,” her real name, but caught herself in time.

“Sarah, sir.”

He grunted.

“More, sir?” she said, tipping the bottle.

“No.”

She took the bottle back and got onto the bed. Minutes passed and she forgot about him, forgot he was there, her eyes on the letter under the statue on the bedside table. A filthy old porcelain of a man and woman fucking, it served as aid for men who needed a suggestion. Sarah thought of her mother, thought of her mother as young woman fucking her father and having her, thought of her mother dead on the bed and who would lay her out. The letter was like some fierce and furtive animal lurking in the room and in her mind.

She must have caught her breath or made a noise because he startled her with, “What was that?”

“Oh, nothing, sir. Just clearing my throat.”

He turned in his chair and peered through the gloom toward her.

“Sarah, you said?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is that your real name?”

“No, sir.” She paused. “Nancy, sir.”

He took that in a moment, or perhaps his mind wandered elsewhere.

“What is your story, Nancy?”

“My story, sir?”

“Your tale. Who are you?”

“Oh, sir,” said Nancy. “I am a tale few folks would like to hear.”

He grunted again. Now he was looking between her thighs. He actually seemed to be a little drunk. She felt ashamed for the gentleman, a bit. But she knew from that look that he was ready, and indeed he tossed down the rest of the drink then rose displaying his manhood, which he stroked roughly to its full, average length.

“Show me your bum, girl,” he said, as always. From long tradition she knew what to do, and slid from the mattress and turned her back to him and raised her hem and bent till her lips were kissing the sheets, presenting herself for his use. She heard his fingers scoop some of the cream from the bedside jar to slop himself with, and then he was between her cheeks and inside her. His oily hand reached round and roughly kneaded her bubs while with the other hand he stroked himself inside her. She’d always guessed from his ardor that this way was his favorite. And the way he saved it for last. To help him, she murmured his voice over and over and like a machine he went in very deep and began to come, collapsing on her broad back, panting. Then he was off of her and moving away.

Sarah straightened herself and her dress.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. She knew that he liked that.

“You’re welcome.” He said it always with that curl of irony in his voice, as if he were speaking to a real lady. He was soaping his cock at the pan and ewer.

She helped him on with his boots and he finished dressing without a word while she lay back on the pillows. As always, he seemed to have forgotten she was there. After a glance in the mirror he found some coins in his clothes, always counted out perfectly beforehand with a little extra for her, and slid them noiselessly into the clay jar beside the door.

“Next Wednesday, sir?” she said.

“Yes,” he said somewhat abstractedly. “Next Wednesday.”

He grabbed his cane from the corner and looked around as if he might have left something. She held the doorknob ready.

“Well,” he said, “goodbye,” he said and paused as if about to add something, but he had already forgotten her name. Or perhaps – a true gentleman – he was uncertain which of her names to use.

“Goodbye, Mr. Darcy,” she said.

Mr. Bartell Darcy went out, turning back the figure on the door to “Unoccupied,” and as she washed herself Sarah heard his carriage roll away over the cobblestones toward that house up on his emerald hill.